

PRABUDDHA BHARATA

or AWAKENED INDIA

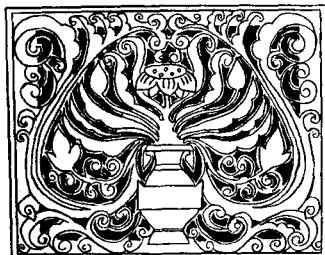


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Started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896

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**PRABUDDHA
BHARATA**

JANUARY 2003

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Cover: Temples in Dakshineshwar seen from the Ganga. The divine site of the first 'awakening'.

उत्तिष्ठत
जाग्रत
प्राप्य
वरान्निवोधत ।

PRABUDDHA BHARATA

Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!

Vol. 108

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No. 1

↔ Traditional Wisdom ↔

SPIRITUAL ASPIRANT

अधिकारिणमाशास्ते फलसिद्धिविशेषतः ।
उपाया देशकालाद्याः सन्त्यस्मिन्सहकारिणः ॥

Success depends entirely on a qualified aspirant. Time, place and other factors are but secondary help. (*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 14)

विवेकिनो विरक्तस्य शमादिगुणशालिनः ।
मुमुक्षोरेव हि ब्रह्मजिज्ञासायाऽयता मता ॥

He who discriminates between the the Real and the unreal, whose mind is turned away from the unreal, who possesses the sixfold virtue like calmness, and who has longing for liberation—such a man alone is considered qualified to inquire after Brahman. (*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, 17)

The flint may remain for myriads of years under water and still not lose its inner fire. Strike it with steel whenever you like, and out flashes the growing spark. So is the true devotee firm in his faith. Though he may remain surrounded by all the impurities of the world, he never loses faith in, and love of God. He warms up with devout enthusiasm as soon as he hears the 'name' of the Lord. (*Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, 92-3)

No great work can be achieved by humbug. It is through Love, a passion for Truth, and tremendous energy, that all undertakings are accomplished. ... Therefore, manifest your manhood. (*Teachings of Swami Vivekananda*, 195)

Sincerely struggle towards the ideal of life, so long as you have strength of body and mind. By no means relax your efforts, saying you will realize the ideal later or that it will be possible only through the Lord's grace. (*Spiritual Teachings of Swami Brahmananda*, 211)

To Our Readers

With this issue *Prabuddha Bharata (Awakened India)* steps into the 108th year of its publication. On this joyous occasion our greetings and best wishes to all our readers, contributors, reviewers, advertisers, friends and well-wishers.

Swami Vivekananda's ideal was 'to preach unto mankind their divinity, and how to make it manifest in every movement

of life'.

Founded by the great Swamiji in 1896, *Prabuddha Bharata* has before it Swamiji's ideal, and has been doing what it can in perpetuating the eternal truths of Vedanta with emphasis on their application in everyday life. We invite you to participate in this endeavour by popularizing the journal among your near and dear ones.

❖ This Month ❖

How the *Bhagavadgita*-based threefold classification of work can help us convert work into a tool for spiritual progress is discussed in this month's editorial **Making Work Work**.

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago features this month excerpts from an article entitled 'Maya'.

Swami Kalyananandaji's passing, the Sevashrama after him, Swami Atulanandaji's visit—Swami Sarvagatanandaji details all this and some more interesting incidents in the fifth part of his reminiscences '**You Will Be a Paramahamsa!**' The author is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order from Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston.

In his thought-provoking article **Swami Vivekananda's Gospel of Work as Worship**, Sri C S Ramakrishnan explains how Self-realization and service to God in man—the main planks of Ramakrishna monasticism—are the mantra for the modern age. Closely associated with the Chennai Ramakrishna Math for decades, the author is a former editor of *Vedanta Kesari*, an English monthly of the Ramakrishna Order.

Half a Decade in the Enchanting Environments of Along by Swami Kirtidanandaji is a gripping account of the inception and growth of the Ramakrishna Mission's educational institution in Along, Arunachal Pradesh. Secretary of the institution from 1969 to 1974, the author describes in the article the developments in Arunachal Pradesh before the Ramakrishna Mission stepped in there, the tribals' attitude towards the monks, how the Mission's English medium school came to be established, and the government's encouragement to the work. A former editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*, the author is presently retired and lives in Vivekananda Ashrama, Ulsoor, Bangalore.

In Personal Development versus Social Well-being Swami Brahmeshanandaji elucidates how in the light of Hindu scriptures and the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda message both Self-realization and service to society are complementary and comprehensive ideals. A former editor of *Vedanta Kesari*, the author is head of Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh.

Swami Vivekananda was a universal personality who could recognize and appreciate

greatness wherever he found it. Weakness and timidness did not escape his censure either. In his brilliant article **Swami Vivekananda Loved America** Sri Asim Chaudhuri unravels the American traits that charmed Swamiji, including the noble qualities of American women that impressed Swamiji no end. The author is well known for his work *Swami Vivekananda in Chicago: New Findings*, published by Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata. Readers are also familiar with his article 'Swami Vivekananda—A Manager Extraordinaire' in the April 2002 issue of this journal. Sri Chaudhuri recently retired as a Six Sigma Black Belt professional with Caterpillar Inc, a multinational company based in Peoria, Illinois, USA.

In his thought-provoking article **Reflections on Truth** Swami Nityasthanandaji stresses the importance of a philosophical attitude in life, and the need to pierce through opinions covering truth and perceive the Spirit, the only truth behind our everyday life. A monk of the Ramakrishna Order, the author is editor of its Kannada organ *Viveka Prabha*, published from Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore.

In his learned article **Swamiji's Neo-Vedantism** Prof Amalendu Chakraborty brings out the distinctive features of Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta vis-à-vis Sri Shankara's Advaita Vedanta. The author is a former head of the department of philosophy, Presidency College, Kolkata, and has a long and close association with several centres of the Ramakrishna Mission.

Pilgrims on the Fourfold Path by Swami Sunirmalanandaji is a unique portrayal of the message of harmony and synthesis lived and taught by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. A former editor of *Prabuddha Bharata*, the author is now an Acharya at the

Probationers' Training Centre at the Ramakrishna Order's headquarters in Belur Math.

In **A Brief Overview of Indian Culture and Spirituality** Swami Sandarshanandaji rightly observes that to tap India's spiritual wealth one needs to scratch beneath the surface; one will then discover the keynotes of *Sanatana Dharma*, Religion Eternal: tolerance and harmony of religions. A monk of the Ramakrishna Order, the author is from Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deogarh.

The Pāñcarātra Āgamas: A Brief Study by Swami Harshanandaji is a discussion on the origin and philosophy of these important Vaishnava scriptures with a brief explanation of the presently available literature on these Agamas. A senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and accomplished writer and speaker, the author is President of Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore.

The year 2000 marked the centenary of dedicated service to God, Narayana, in the form of the sick and the suffering by the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Varanasi. The institution had a humble beginning in 1900, thanks to some feeling hearts inspired by Swami Vivekananda. In his article **A Hundred-year Saga of Service to God** Swami Shuddhavratanandaji, head of the institution, traces its history from inception to the present.

Jābāla Upaniṣad is the fifth instalment of the translation of this important Sannyasa Upanishad by Swami Atmapriyanandaji, Principal, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur. The elaborate notes are based on Upanishad Brahmayogin's commentary.

Glimpses of Holy Lives, Reviews and Reports will appear from the next issue.

Making Work Work

EDITORIAL

Sattva, *rajas* and *tamas* are the three building blocks of nature. There is nothing in the world free from the three *gunas*, says the *Bhagavadgita*.¹ *Sattva, rajas* and *tamas* manifest in the world as calmness, activity and inertness, respectively. And world includes both external—perceivable by the senses—and internal—the mind and its functions. Karma yoga, says Swami Vivekananda, 'has specially to deal with these three factors. By teaching what they are and how to employ them, it helps us to do our work better.'²

As Is the Mind So Is the Work

What is more significant and more worthy of consideration, however, is the inner world, the world that determines what we make of life in the external world—heaven or hell. It is our mind and its contents that determine our actions in the external world, including our interaction with others.

A study of different kinds of work, workers and the mind, which influences both, can be a helpful tool to assess our present condition and adjust our orientation towards perfection. In the *Bhagavadgita* Sri Krishna details a catalogue of such threefold things. Verses 23 to 35 of the eighteenth chapter explain the threefold *guna*-based classification of work, workers, intellect (*buddhi*) and fortitude (*dhṛti*).

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to remember that *buddhi* is the discriminative and decision-making faculty of the mind. It is also the seat of will power, the ability to control our thoughts and actions in order to achieve what we want to do. If *buddhi* can be said to be the static aspect of the will, *dhṛti*—usually translated as *fortitude*—is its dynamic aspect and the driving force behind

our actions, mental and physical.

The Importance of *Buddhi* and *Dhṛti*

Both *buddhi* and *dhṛti* come into picture and become operative only when we start disciplining the mind and try to channel its energies in constructive directions. Till then, our actions are governed by the mind and the senses, which, undisciplined as they are, sweep us off our feet and engage us in undesirable actions in spite of ourselves. Arjuna asked Sri Krishna what compels man to commit sin in spite of himself, driven, as it were, by force. The Lord said, 'These are desire and anger, born of *rajas*. Know these two to be the enemies, all-devouring, and the cause of all sin.'³ In such cases neither *buddhi* nor *dhṛti* steers his actions; the two enemies take care of that. A study of different kinds of *buddhi* and *dhṛti* at the back of our actions can thus be profitable for those intent on making work work on themselves, effecting positive transformation.

Three *Guṇas*: Some Salient Points

We attempted a detailed study of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in the March 2002 editorial 'The Three-stranded Rope'. A couple of important points can be recalled here for our discussion: 1. None of us has in us any one *guṇa* to the exclusion of the other two. All of them inhere together, but one predominates the other two, deciding our nature. 2. *Sattva* helps us go forward towards our spiritual destiny, *rajas* makes us stay put and *tamas* pulls us down. 3. Though *sattva* and *tamas* virtually look alike, the way to *sattva* is not a straight jump from *tamas*, but through *rajas*. Now, with this background, we shall examine the threefold *Gita* classification of work, workers and the mind behind both.

Inferior Type (*Tāmasic*)

The inferior type of work is undertaken through delusion and confused thinking, without heed to the following factors.

1. The consequence of the work, in terms of the welfare and wealth that accrue to the individual and society.
2. The loss of wealth and power in the execution of the work.

3. Injury to others during and after the work. Every work done, every decision taken, is bound to have both positive and negative effects, benefiting some and displeasing others. According to the *Gita*, all activities have some blemish in them, even as fire is enveloped by smoke. That should not, however, make us relinquish the duty to which we are born, though attended with evil. (18.48) One can, of course, ensure that the merits of work outweigh its demerits.

4. Ability—one's own as well as of others associated with the work. This is the all-important human resources factor, lack of attention to which is a sure recipe for disaster. An inferior worker embarks on a project without proper analysis of human resources for the job. He does not do the important SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunities, Threats) analysis before taking up a project.

What causes these deficiencies? Evidently, the worker's mind. Such a worker's intellect perceives dharma (righteousness) as adharma (unrighteousness) and vice versa. He views everything in a perverted light. He is endowed with a *dhṛti* (fortitude) that binds him to sleep, fear, grief, despondency and overweening conceit. 'There is no substitute for hard work', 'No rules for success will work if you don't'—such slogans cannot be more relevant in his case.

A *tāmasic* worker is unsteady, vulgar, arrogant, dishonest, malicious, indolent, desponding and procrastinating—adequate

qualifications for slipshodness and failure in any activity. He does not postpone anything to tomorrow if it can be done on the day after. He has every chance of mistaking the apparent calmness of inaction and sloth for that born of *sattva*. *Sattva* and *tamas* being extremities, this error proves costly for him, steeping him more and more in *tamas*, ignorance.

Mediocre Type (*Rājasic*)

The mediocre work is prompted by desire and performed with self-conceit and much effort. A *rājasic* worker acts passionately, desirous of the fruits of actions and is easily subject to elation or depression by success or failure in work. He has scant regard for purity, physical and mental, and could have malignant motives behind his work.

His attachment to the results of action can have two implications: 1. The end becomes more important to him, the means often getting relegated to the background; 2. work-induced tension and stress, with predictable adverse effect on health.

A tamasic worker has every chance of mistaking the apparent calmness of inaction and sloth for that born of sattva. Sattva and tamas being extremities, this error proves costly for him, steeping him more and more in tamas, ignorance.

His actions and the results need newspaper blazoning since he acts out of self-conceit. More important, he is not conscious of the divine element that impels him to action. The *Gita* lists five factors responsible for any work: the body, the doer (*kartrtva*, the sense of agentship in work), the different senses, the different functions of manifold kind, and the presiding deity (the divinity behind the sense organs, or God, the inner Controller, *antaryāmin*). (18.14) The mediocre worker is hardly aware of the most important fifth factor, God, since

he is convinced that *he* is the doer.

There are again other factors deciding the outcome of an activity, such as others involved in it, coordinating agencies, sanctioning authorities, and so on. Besides doing one's part by proper study and presentation of the case, one can do little in influencing the outcome of work. Excessive brooding over results makes the *rājasic* worker oblivious of such important factors. Or, since the end is more important to him than the means, he takes to unfair means to influence the outcome in his favour.

Since *rājasic* work is desire-prompted, such a worker is subject to desire's inevitable and inseparable companion: anger.

It is the body and the mind that are active; not the Atman, our real nature, which is free from action. So the root of all work-related misery is our mistaking the body and the mind for our real Self. ... A worker who discriminates thus, works for work's sake.

What is the mental make-up of a *rājasic* worker? His intellect has a distorted apprehension of what is dharma and what is adharma—this explains his end justifying the means—and which activities are to be undertaken and which to be avoided. His fortitude makes him regulate his life according to (his own understanding of) dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth) and kama (desire)—three of the four basic human values. He does not trouble himself about the all-important fourth value, moksha (freedom or liberation from samsara (transmigratory existence), the goal of human life.

Superior Type (*Sāttvic*)

Sāttvic work is that ordained by one's nature and vocation. It is done without attachment or feelings of love or hatred, and without

desire for its results or rewards. A *sāttvic* worker is not attached to his work, and, in the absence of self-conceit, does it without blowing his own trumpet. He is unmoved by success or failure and yet is endowed with fortitude and enthusiasm for work.

Such a worker is endowed with a sharp discriminating intellect, *buddhi*. He knows the distinction between involvement in and detachment from work; activities to be undertaken and activities to be avoided; what is to be feared and what is not to be feared; what is bondage and what is freedom. He is one-pointed in his yoga (attuning himself to his real, divine nature) and is endowed with a fortitude (*dhṛti*) that helps him hold in check the activities of his mind and the senses.

Calmness in the Midst of Activity

Sattva is not inertness or inaction, but calmness in the midst of intense activity. An incident from Swami Vivekananda's life illustrates this important fact. Swamiji was shown by a friend of his a picture of Sri Krishna addressing Arjuna in the battlefield. When the friend pressed for his criticism, Swamiji said that he was not happy with the expression on Sri Krishna's face or with the chariot, whose shape was not in keeping with Sri Krishna's time. When someone questioned him on how Sri Krishna should have been depicted in the picture, Swamiji said:

Shri Krishna ought to be painted as He really was, the Gita personified; and the central idea of the Gita should radiate from His whole form as he was teaching the path of Dharma to Arjuna, who had been overcome by infatuation and cowardice.

So saying, Swamiji posed himself in the way Shri Krishna should be portrayed and said, 'Look here, thus does he hold the bridle of the horses —so tight that they are brought to their haunches, with their forelegs fighting the air,

and their mouths gaping. This will show a tremendous play of action in the figure of Shri Krishna. His friend, the world-renowned hero, casting aside his bow and arrows, has sunk down like a coward on the chariot, in the midst of the two armies. And Shri Krishna, whip in one hand and tightening the reins with the other, has turned Himself towards Arjuna, with his childlike face beaming with unworldly love and sympathy, and a calm and serene look—and is delivering the message of the Gita to his beloved comrade. Now, tell me what idea this picture of the Preacher of the Gita conveys to you.'

The friend: 'Activity combined with firmness and serenity.'

Swamiji: 'Ay, that's it! Intense action in the whole body, and withal a face expressing the profound calmness and serenity of the blue sky. This is the central idea of the Gita—to be calm and steadfast in all circumstances, with one's body, mind, and soul centred at His hallowed Feet!'⁴

Tamas to Sattva through Rajas

Thus the journey from the calmness born of inertia to the calmness amid work is through intense activity. That is, the road from *tamas* to *sattva* passes through *rajas*; there is no bypass. It is through intense *rajas*, activity that man can rise from his *tamas*, inert nature and become free from attachment to sleep, sloth and procrastination. Swami Vivekananda narrates an incident that makes the point clear:

I once met a man in my country whom I had known before as a very stupid, dull person, who knew nothing and had not the desire to know anything, and was living the life of a brute. He asked me what he should do to know God, how he was to get free. 'Can you tell a lie?' I asked him. 'No,' he replied. 'Then you must learn to do so. It is better to tell a lie than to be a brute, or a log of wood. You are inactive; you have not certainly reached the highest state, which is beyond all actions, calm and serene;

you are too dull even to do something wicked.' That was an extreme case, of course, and I was joking with him; but what I meant was that a man must be active in order to pass through activity to perfect calmness.⁵

Transformation: *Rājasic* to *Sāttvic*

Granted that a person is able to get rid of *tamas* (inertia and sloth) to a great extent, the problem boils down to transforming *rajas* to *sattva*, restlessness to calmness amid work. As we already saw, *rajas* does not inhere in us to the exclusion of *sattva* or *tamas*. Only it predominates the other two in a *rājasic* person. A deeper look at the factors that distinguish *sāttvic* work from *rājasic* can help us increase

Swamiji sets things in perspective: Do not stand on a high pedestal and take five cents in your hand and say, "Here, my poor man," but be grateful that the poor man is there, so that by making a gift to him you are able to help yourself. It is not the receiver that is blessed, but it is the giver. ...'

sattva amid *rājasic* work.

Freedom from self-conceit and attachment to the fruits of action: Since God is the Prime Mover of all activities,⁶ it is unwise to appropriate to oneself one's activities and results. The devotional way out is to mentally offer our actions and their results to God. An attitude of worship towards work can be a great help in getting rid of our attachment to its results. Over to Swami Vivekananda:

Do you ask anything from your children in return for what you have given them? It is your duty to work for them, and there the matter ends. In whatever you do for a particular person, a city, or a state, assume the same attitude towards it as you have towards your children—expect nothing in return. If you can invariably take the position of a giver, in which everything given by you is a free offering to the world, without any thought of return, then will

your work bring you no attachment. Attachment comes only where we expect a return.

If working like slaves results in selfishness and attachment, working as master of our own mind gives rise to the bliss of non-attachment. ... All thought of obtaining return for the work we do hinders our spiritual progress; nay, in the end it brings misery. There is another way in which this idea of mercy and selfless charity can be put into practice; that is, by looking upon work as 'worship' in case we believe in a Personal God. Here we give up all the fruits of our work unto the Lord, and worshipping Him thus, we have no right to expect anything from

are privileged to help. Swamiji sets things in perspective: 'Do not stand on a high pedestal and take five cents in your hand and say, "Here, my poor man," but be grateful that the poor man is there, so that by making a gift to him you are able to help yourself. It is not the receiver that is blessed, but it is the giver. Be thankful that you are allowed to exercise your power of benevolence and mercy in the world, and thus become pure and perfect.'⁸

Freedom from expectation: An incident related to Holy Mother Sarada Devi and a little girl illustrates how this single trait can help us develop same-sightedness towards all.

Man's natural tendency is to throw a party if something good happens, and sit and brood in a corner in a contrary situation. A little even-mindedness can make us saner in our interaction with people, besides toning up the quality of work. This even-mindedness, which Sri Krishna defines as yoga, is an inevitable result of offering the fruits of actions to God.

mankind for the work we do. The Lord Himself works incessantly and is ever without attachment. Just as water cannot wet the lotus leaf, so work cannot bind the unselfish man by giving rise to attachment to results. The selfless and unattached man may live in the very heart of a crowded and sinful city; he will not be touched by sin.⁷

From the monistic standpoint, it is the body and the mind that are active; not the Atman, our real nature, which is free from action. So the root of all work-related misery is our mistaking the body and the mind for our real Self, identifying our 'I' with the body-mind complex. A worker who discriminates thus, works for work's sake.

Be grateful to the recipient of service: 'I did so much for him; he didn't even thank me.' —this is a common grouse against those we

There was a child in Calcutta who gave a great deal of trouble to her family and always demanded attention. She used to visit Holy Mother with her own mother. Whenever she entered the Mother's room she clung to her. The Mother always gave her plenty of sweets to eat. Once Holy Mother was about to leave for Jayarambati and said to the little girl: 'Darling, you have been visiting me a long time. Do you love me?'

'Yes, I love you very much.'

'How much?'

The girl stretched her arms as wide as she could and said: 'That much.' The Mother asked: 'Will you still love me when I am away at Jayarambati?'

'Yes, I will love you just the same. I shall not forget you.'

'How shall I know it?'

'What should I do to make you know?'

'I shall be sure of your love for me if you can love everyone at home.'

'All right, I will love all of them. I will not be naughty any more.'

'That's very good. But how shall I know that you will love all equally, and not some more and some less?'

'What should I do to love all equally?'

'Let me tell you how to love all equally. Do not demand anything of those you love. If you make demands, some will give you more and some less. In that case you will love more those who

give you more and less those who give you less. Thus your love will not be the same for all. You will not be able to love all impartially.⁹ [emphasis added]

Attention to the means: While for a *rājasic* worker the end usually justifies the means, the *sāttvic* worker is careful about the means. He knows that if he took care of the means, the end would take care of itself. When the end justifies the means, the questionable means leaves an impression on our mind, which forges one more link in the chain that binds us to the world, besides loosening our moral fibre. Swamiji's words need to be etched in memory by anyone who wants to make work work: 'For the world can be good and pure, only if our lives are good and pure. It is an effect, *we are the means. Therefore, let us purify ourselves. Let us make ourselves perfect.*'¹⁰ [emphasis added] In other words, work itself is a means to purification of mind and acquiring knowledge. It is not an end in itself.

Desirelessness: Every desire-prompted work is born in ignorance—ignorance of our real nature. *Avidyā-kāma-karma* (ignorance-desire-action) is a chain Sri Shankara often refers to in his commentaries. Vedanta does recognize the need for gradual sublimation of desires and sanctions desires that are not contradictory to dharma.¹¹ Dharma underlines the importance of taking care of the means, not making it subservient to the end.

Even-mindedness in success and failure: Man's natural tendency is to throw a party if something good happens, and sit and brood in a corner in a contrary situation. A little even-mindedness can make us saner in our interaction with people, besides toning up the quality of work. This even-mindedness, which Sri Krishna defines as *yoga*,¹² is an inevitable result of offering the fruits of actions to God. Repeated offering of actions to God makes one grow more and more discriminative about 'in-

volvement in and detachment from action; activities to be undertaken and those to be avoided; what is to be feared and what is not to be feared'—important traits of a *sāttvic* worker. Being conscious that his actions should be worthy of being offered to God, he is more quality-conscious about his work besides undergoing a qualitative change himself.

* * *

To summarize. Work should help us transcend our inert nature and become active; and transcend that too and become calm amid activity. The journey involves mind discipline and an alert mind that monitors one's thoughts and actions. The goal of work is to make us know that we are spiritual entities free from work, and endow us with a healthy mind unperturbed by success and failure, praise and blame, profit and loss—in fact, from all pairs of opposites that characterize life in the world—and make us free. *

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6. *Gita*, 15.4.
7. *CW*, 1.59-60.
8. *ibid.*, 1.76.
9. Swami Nikhilananda, *Holy Mother* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1962), 128-9.
10. *CW*, 2.9.
11. *Dharmāviruddho bhūteṣu kamo'smi bharatarṣabha*.—*Gita*, 7.11.
12. *Samatvām yoga ucyate*.—*ibid.*, 2.48.

Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago

January 1903

Maya

An eternal endeavour to attain the end and eternal readiness to frustrate it, when attained! This is Maya. One man has enough to eat and drink; another dies of hunger and cold. Men are with strong impulses and ideas for enjoyment; there is nothing outside to fill them.

Happiness is direct misery to one or indirect misery to another. Not a breath can be drawn without destroying hundreds of lives. Every morsel the rich man eats can have saved the life of the poor dying of starvation. The victorious rejoice; the vanquished weep.

Culture is so beautiful! The uncultured man in the forest has his pleasures and pains only in the senses. His senses are gross; so are his pleasures and pains. The sense of the cultured man is sharpened. But the very sharpening of the sense which develops in him higher powers of enjoyment, is fatally attended with a proportional development of his higher powers of suffering too. Culture multiplies the sources of pleasure; it multiplies equally, if not more, the sources of misery too. ...

Death is the goal of life, of beauty, of wealth, of love, of power, of vice, of virtue too; everything dies; yet tremendous clinging on to life exists.

Eternal change and unrest is the rule of the universe. The dearest friend of to-day is the deadliest enemy of to-morrow. Not one particle of the universe is at rest. Yet this mass of never-ceasing change is producing appearances of permanence, which everybody thinks will be his and for which everybody struggles till death. ...

At every step Nature proves man is a slave to Her laws; yet, simultaneously, there is the idea that he is free; an idea without which who can live or enjoy life even for a moment?

The universe is a glaring mixture of contradictions, and the Energy which sustains it and runs through its manifold changes and manifestations is termed Maha-Maya. ...

All beings live, move and have their existence in Her. To work any way is to work in and with Her. And is it not madness to associate and work with Her? A great work is built up by the sacrifice of a whole life: at one touch of Her finger the whole thing crumbles down. Where are the great works of Sri Krishna, Buddha, Sankara or Christ? They worked their whole lifetimes to do good to the world. The world is as bad as ever. True, by the advent of the great men, a wave of purity and goodness travels over the earth for some time, but that period, compared with eternity, is nothing.

These are terrible facts for which there is no explanation. To understand them, one has to understand Maha-Maya. Is it possible to understand Her? To be understood, She has to be made the *object* of knowledge. But as long as the knower—the *subject* of knowledge—is within Maha-Maya, all his knowledge and *objects* of knowledge are *within* Her. Hence She can never be made the *object* of knowledge by anyone who is within Her domain. Brahman-State, Vedanta says, is beyond Maha-Maya and, for those who go beyond Maha-Maya and reach the Brahman-State, She is no more. Maha-Maya is like darkness and Brahman-State is like light. No sooner light is brought in than darkness vanishes; even so, no sooner Brahman-State is attained than Maha-Maya vanishes. Any attempt to know Her by reaching the Brahman-State would be as futile as trying to see darkness by means of light. Hence the why of Her eternal play remains for ever unanswered by those who are within Her, because of their inability to bring Her within the limit of their cognizance, while those who

go beyond Her do not need an answer, because with them She is non-existent.

Is there no escape out of this stupendous mockery? Is man to be eternally cheated helplessly by the lies of Nature? The heart sinks at the thought.

The man who cannot or will not see the hideous falsity of Nature and is content to live in this world born as he is, lives the life of a brute. Again, of those who, intensely dissatisfied with the present state of things, dare stand up to find for themselves a way out of Maya, few succeed in the attempt. 'One, perchance, in thousands of men, strives for perfection; and one, perchance, among the blessed ones, striving thus, knows Me in reality,' says the Lord in the *Gita*, meaning by *perfection* and *Me* the state beyond Maya (Ch. VII, 3). Yet, is it not better to give up life in the struggle for the high ideal than lead the life of continuous ignorance and mistake? On this side, is the world full of Maya's lies and contradictions; on the other, is at least the hope of victory over all the ills of life. Nay, if eternal defeat be certain, there is yet glory in fighting an unending battle!

Is there no hope? 'Verily this My Maya, divine and made up of the *gunas*, is very difficult to cross. Those that come unto Me alone, cross this Maya,' (*Gita*, VII, 14) is the voice man hears in despair. And, child-like, he cries to his Great Mother Maha-Maya, 'O Mother! Thou art all. Thou doest whatever Thou choosest to do. Thy terrible play is the universe. I had enough of it. Take me now out of it. Or if it be Thy will, I be here, show me it is Thou, behind death and life, behind misery and happiness, behind ignorance and light; show me the whole universe is full of Thee, the One Mother Divine.' This is self-resignation—fulfilment of Bhakti. The cry may not be heard: but the child cries for its Mother alone.

On the other side, is the Jnani—the violent son of Maha-Maya. He is a matricide. Raged at the cruel sport of his Mother, he stands with the sword, Viveka, in firm grip, to kill Her. He prays not for any help from Her. Reliant on his own strength, he will cut his way out of Maya. He is no more deceived by Her lies. Let whatever form or name of Hers come to Him, he merges them, by his power of discrimination, into the Infinite One beyond Maha-Maya—his own Self, and is finally established in IT, when Maya's play ceases for him. Perhaps the struggle never ends: but the Jnani is determined to wage an eternal war. Foolish child! Little does he know that the strength he calls his own flows from the Mother Herself, the fountain-head of all strength.

Whether one is a Bhakta or a Jnani, so long as one is within Maha-Maya, She cannot be deceived. The fruit drops not, unless it is fully ripe; death comes not, until one is old: that is the ordinary rule of Her universal region. Death in childhood or youth, death sudden and violent, is, as it were, unnatural. And what is Mukti? All individualities are within Maya. One who keeps up one's individuality is bound to be within Maya. Mukti, or going beyond Maya, is another name for total annihilation of one's individuality. This death of individuality is the only real death. Other so-called deaths are only apparent, they being mere change of one form into another. This death of individuality is the most natural death. To die such a natural death, none escapes the universal rule of Maha-Maya; 'The fruit drops not, unless it is fully ripe.' The individuality-fruit will never drop down from the Maya-tree, unless it is fully ripe. The Bhakta's individuality will have to be fully developed in Bhakti. From him is demanded sincere and extreme self-resignation. The Jnani's individuality will have to be fully developed in Viveka. He must entirely forget that he is the body or mind, and live and stand firm in the Self, beyond body and mind. Nothing short of full development will do. When Bhakti or Viveka will reach its fully developed state of perfection, be sure the ripe individuality-fruit will drop of itself, in obedience to the immutable universal law, 'Destroy all that is perfect.' Its connection with the Maya-tree ceases and emancipation from the bondage of Maha-Maya is attained.

*

—Hope

‘You Will Be a Paramahamsa!’

SWAMI SARVAGATANANDA

Part 5: Kalyan Maharaj’s Passing and Other Events

Before he left for his final trip to Mussoorie in the summer of 1937, Kalyan Maharaj gave the safe key to me in the presence of all the other swamis at the Sevashrama. He said, ‘In my absence you manage things.’ He could have asked the other senior swamis to take care. I did not like his handing over charge to me. I returned him the key and said, ‘I cannot manage this. I don’t know anything. I have never opened your safe.’ ‘No, you take it,’ he persisted. It was almost like an order. I gave it to Swami Durganandaji, but he refused and returned it to me. Then Maharaj told them, ‘All of you help him.’ Turning to me he said, ‘Having the key doesn’t make you boss. You are the servant of all. You have to do the work in consultation with them. Keep the key with you, manage everything including the finances.’ I touched the feet of the senior swamis and they said, ‘We shall all help you; don’t worry. Your taking charge is perfectly all right.’ That is why even when a new secretary and assistant secretary came to the Sevashrama later, Swami Madhavanandaji wrote a letter saying, ‘Narayan will manage as instructed by Kalyan Swami.’

Kalyan Maharaj’s Passing

Swami Vireswaranandaji, Swami Srivasanandaji and his pre-monastic grandson Narayan Maharaj (later Swami Vandanananda) came to Kankhal by the end of 1936. Swami Vireswaranandaji had spent one year in Kankhal after he stepped down as president of Advaita Ashrama. He also went to Rishikesh for *tapasya* and spent his time in a silent, contemplative mood. Sometimes we carried supplies to him. There was a wonderful feeling of

love between Swami Kalyananandaji and Swami Vireswaranandaji. Swami Kalyananandaji loved him very much. When Kalyan Maharaj passed away in October 1937, Vireswaranandaji came to Kankhal to be with us. He was supervising the whole affair, a very timely help that was badly needed.

What had happened was this: Kalyan Maharaj had gone to Mussoorie because of ill health. On 20 October he wrote to me asking me to bring him a hot-water bottle and some medicines. On 23 October I went with these things in a car to Dehra Dun and then towards Mussoorie. The roads were so narrow that there could be just one-way traffic, either upward or downward. But there were junctions. At a junction I heard someone calling out to me, as though in expectation. It was Swami Srivasanandaji with Narayan Maharaj from a big bus. I went to the bus and asked them, ‘Where is Maharaj?’ They pointed to the floor where his body was lying. The moment I saw his body I was shocked and almost fell down unconscious. I managed to sit at his feet, and somehow we reached Kankhal. By the time we arrived I was running high fever. They arranged for my rest.

The final rites were performed, in which many monks from outside participated. Before the cremation they asked me to join for a group photograph with Maharaj’s body. I said I did not want to be in any photograph. Then they practically dragged me there and said, ‘You must sit beside Maharaj.’ I was not interested in the photograph. What good is the photograph when the man himself has gone? But the photo was taken. However, I tore up the copy that was given me. I did not like to see

it. I do not know what happened to the other copies. Afterwards they carried the body for cremation, but I was flat on my bed. I was sick for about a month. I was shell-shocked.

Getting over the Shock

I thought who was going to manage the whole thing. Before Maharaj died he had given me the key and asked me to take care of things. 'Others will help you,' he had said. But I had said, 'I don't know anything.' But during that one crucial month Swami Vireswaranandaji said to me daily in a very gentle way, 'Don't worry. You will make it. You will be all right. We will manage it.' A few days later he slowly asked me some questions: What is this and that? What about such-and- such medicines? I told him whatever I knew. Later on, he brought the hospital records and gradually asked me some more questions. After some time I was all right and they all helped me get on with the job.

A swami was deputed from Belur Math to take over as secretary of the Sevashrama, but still they asked me to manage. With the help of all those people I did the work. Officially they were all there, but Maharaj had made everything known to me, and in that sense had put me in charge. Practically I was a non entity, not even an ordained brahmacharin. But Kalyan Maharaj's trust in me had been total.

Kalyan Maharaj's Love and Trust

Swami Kalyananandaji was full of love. He was everything to me. That is why his death was a big blow, because all my hopes were in him. He loved me so much, much beyond my imagination. And that trust! I had never before seen anyone putting so much trust in me. Swami Durganandaji once observed, 'After Narayan's coming, Swami Kalyananandaji has opened his heart very wide; anybody can get anything.' They used to push

me to the forefront for everything they wanted; Kalyan Maharaj never said no. He was always so nice, so obliging. Really, I felt that he had given me a new life. I thought that a new light had come into my life.

Sometime after his death, while cleaning his trunks I came across a big bundle of Kashmiri woollen wrappers called *alowans*. They were chadars to be worn in the shrine. They were of light wool and beautiful texture. I do not know when he had procured them. He had written our names on slips of paper and had pinned them onto each wrapper. It was unbelievable. Possibly he thought of giving them to us during winter, but he had to go to Mussoorie. He passed away but the chadars remained. I handed them to Swami Vireswaranandaji, who distributed them to all of us.

***Turning to me Kalyan Maharaj said,
Having the key doesn't make you boss. You
are the servant of all. You have to do the
work in consultation with them. Keep the
key with you, manage everything including
the finances.'***

The chadars bore our names, all the brahma-charins and sadhus. We all became emotional and wept.

His Inheritance from the Post Office

There was a communication from the post office stating that some money was due to Maharaj. The postmaster thought that I was Maharaj's disciple and asked me to sign for the amount. In India if a sadhu dies, the inheritance goes to his disciple or disciples, or the Order or the brother disciples or the guru. There is some such law about bequest in India. Therefore the postmaster simply said, 'You are his disciple. You sign for it and I will give you the money.' 'I am not his disciple,' I told him. 'We know that you are his disciple because he never sent anyone else to the post of-

fice on his behalf. Other swamis were there and he could have sent them.' I was always with him wherever he went, which made them take me to be his disciple. The postmaster would have given me the amount if I signed for it. I was more than his disciple in one sense, but I could not technically claim to be one. Being a disciple of Swami Akhandanandaji Maharaj, I said no, and we had to go to court to apply for a succession certificate. We wrote to all of his brother disciples: Swamis Paramanandaji and Bodhanandaji—who were in America—and Swamis Achalanandaji, Virajanandaji and Brahmachari Jnan

even an ordained brahmacharin but they never cared. They said, 'Whatever it is, you are his disciple. We respect you. We have never seen him, the new secretary. We know you, that's all—no one else.' I had to plead with them and tell them that the secretary was Holy Mother's disciple and a great sadhu. Finally they accepted him, but said I should also be attending their functions. That is how it was: both of us participated in their functions. They gave me everything that is given to monks on such occasions, such as a nice copper vessel and a cloth. Of course, they gave me a white cloth in place of an ochre one since I was a brahmacharin.

Atulanandaji went close to the picture and had a careful look at it. Next morning he said to me, 'Do you know something about that picture?' 'No, I found it packed in a box. I don't know anything more.' He asked me to bring it to him. On the back of the picture was his signature ! In 1916 he had sent it to Kalyan Maharaj from America as a Christmas card. His signature had almost faded because it was 1940, long after he sent the card. Kalyan Maharaj evidently had never opened it.

Maharaj. These five had to sign it. It took more than a year for the amount to reach us.

New Secretary Introduced to Outside Monks

Outside monks also thought I was Kalyan Maharaj's disciple because he always took me with him to their functions. Since no other sadhu accompanied him and they saw me regularly with him, they concluded that I must be his disciple. When he died they did not accept as the representative of the Sevashrama the monk who was sent from Belur Math to be secretary. I had to convince them. I was not

Swami Atulanandaji's Visit

Our Sevashrama had a photograph of Swami Kalyanandaji, but not of Nischayanandaji. Many people said there was no photograph of the swami. When Swami Atulanandaji visited the Sevashrama in 1940, I asked him about it. He said, 'The Fox sisters came to Hardwar and they took a photo of him.' He wrote to one of the sisters still alive, and we got the photo.

During Atulanandaji's visit I did the decorations on Christmas Eve. I then discovered in a box something special: a big cardboard folder. When you opened it there was a beautiful picture of a manger, Mary and the baby Jesus. I placed the picture on the altar and illuminated it with a light. Atulanandaji went close to the picture and had a careful look at it. Next morning he said to me, 'Do you know something about that picture?' 'No, I found it packed in a box. I don't know anything more.' He asked me to bring it to him. On the back of the picture was his signature ! In 1916 he had sent it to Kalyan Maharaj from America as a Christmas card. His signature had almost faded because

it was 1940, long after he sent the card. Kalyan Maharaj evidently had never opened it.

More Things Unopened

Not only that; he had not opened several other things. People had sent him cheques, which were all still intact, unopened. After his demise, I found those cheques in his safe and wrote to the donors. They got the cheques validated again and helped us realize the amount; they were very happy that the cheques had not been destroyed after all. Kalyan Maharaj never bothered about who donated how much. Money did not concern him at all.

Sevashrama after Kalyan Maharaj

Sometime after his passing, I began to feel his absence as a guiding force. There was a secretary, an assistant secretary, an official set-up and all that. But I found myself in a very difficult situation because I was the youngest of the lot — not even an ordained brahmacharin — and was told by the others, 'What do you know?' I kept quiet. How could I explain to them what I saw and learnt from Maharaj? The smooth functioning of the hospital was disturbed. People interfered in everything, and I had no voice in anything. Thus passed two years.

After that I thought I had reached my endurance limit, so I went to Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj at Shyamla Tal and apprised him of the goings on: 'I find it difficult to function according to Swamiji's ideals. The others have their own ideas and I am puzzled about what is to be done. I have certain things to do but can't, being the junior-most. I am in a fix. I don't think I shall be able to continue there any longer. It would be better if you send me elsewhere.' 'No, you get back,' he said. 'Just do whatever you were doing. Don't worry about anything. Everything will be all right. Be yourself and function as you did during Swami

Kalyanananda's time. Don't worry.'

I returned to the Sevashrama. All the swamis and brahmacharins were present at the railway station—even my dog! 'What's the matter?' I asked. 'Did you go and tell Swami Virajanandaji that you were going away from here?' 'Who told you that?' 'We got the feeling that you wanted to go away from here. Please don't do it,' the boys said. 'We are behind you. Do what you were doing. Let no one disturb your way of functioning.' And the senior swamis said, 'Certainly. Why should you go away from here?' So I stayed and all were very cooperative. Later on, Belur Math recalled the secretary from the Sevashrama.

Others had their rules and regulations. Swami Kalyananandaji had none. He just *felt* and did things as he felt the need. That was his speciality. I discovered then an important truth: If your peace and joy depend on some-

I discovered then an important truth: If your peace and joy depend on someone over whom you have no control, you can never be peaceful. Be detached from everything. Do your duty; that is all. It is Thakur's work and you are dedicated to that. Do it; that is all, nothing else.

one over whom you have no control, you can never be peaceful. Be detached from everything. Do your duty; that is all. It is Thakur's work and you are dedicated to that. Do it; that is all, nothing else. Do not worry about other things. Many things happened but I never worried.

Barlowgunj Ashrama

Swami Atulanandaji visited Kankhal from 1940 to 1943. The first one or two years we rented a house for him during the hot summer months. Later we purchased a house for him at Barlowgunj—a cool, nice place. A friend of ours, Mr Gandhi (you find his name

mentioned in *Atman Alone Abides*), accompanied me that day. He asked me whether I liked that house and I said yes. Then he went to the owner of the house and said, 'I would like to buy this. How much do you want?' He paid a cheque right away, a few thousand rupees, and then said to me, 'Here it is, your house.' I said, 'But why did you do that?' 'Every year you work hard. You have no time off from the hospital. Now you have got a house.' 'But a house is a problem, a responsibility,' I protested. 'Oh, I will attend to that,' he replied. That is how that house was purchased. Later on it was handed over to headquarters and they called it 'Sri Sarada Kutir', the Barlowgunj Ashrama.¹

A Sadhu's Unique Floral Offering

He asked in Hindi, 'Where should I offer them?' 'Wherever it pleases you,' I replied. Before I knew what was happening, he lifted his hands and placed the flowers on my head.

There was a great monk named Ganganadas, who lived nearby in a small hut on the bank of the Ganges. Quite often when there was a feast, Kalyan Maharaj sent him some fruits and sweets through me. We did not talk much. He would accept them, smile and enquire about us, and I would return. I did not have much time to spend there either. Whenever he visited the Sevashrama, Maharaj received him respectfully and gave him something to eat. He would just eat standing and walk away. Maharaj told me, 'Whenever the sadhu comes, pay special attention to him.' After Maharaj's death, it so happened that once during Durga Puja, when people were offering flowers after puja, I was walking from the hospital to the library hall, where the puja was being performed. I saw this monk on the way and took him with me to the puja hall. When it was our turn to offer flowers, I sprin-

kled some water in his hand, gave him some flowers, and requested him to offer them. He asked in Hindi, 'Where should I offer them?' 'Wherever it pleases you,' I said. Before I knew what was happening, he lifted his hands and placed the flowers on my head. I tried to prevent the flowers from falling on the ground and stood like that for a moment. After some time I slowly walked towards the Divine Mother's image and let the flowers fall at Her feet. I stood there speechless. None of those present uttered a word. After some time I realized the situation, indicated to them to continue offering flowers, and left the hall with the sadhu. I felt something very wonderful that day when he put the flowers on me, you know. It was beyond description. The sadhu was like that. He did not believe in images or anything like that.

'Twenty-one days': A Test Case

There is an interesting incident. A great yogi from Rajasthan came to Hardwar and was staying in a shelter for pilgrims. One day he asked a student of his to read out the almanac to him. When a particular day was read out, the yogi told him to stop. That night, when he was reclining on a small bed, his students brought him his food. He did not speak but indicated that he did not want it so they took it away. He did not get up from bed that night. In the morning they came again. He did not stir from the bed; neither did he go out to answer nature's call, nor did he eat anything. He was absolutely calm and quiet. Two days passed thus and his students became disturbed, not knowing what to do. They came to our hospital and said, 'Our teacher, a great yogi, is in this condition. We don't understand what has happened to him. Will you please come over and see?' When they said 'a great yogi', I became especially interested. (I was always curious to see such people. That inquisitiveness was, so to say, my

foolishness. Years before, I heard about a man who had been buried for forty days, and I walked eighteen miles just to see him.)

I went with our doctor to see the yogi. He was a heavily built person. He did not talk. His students told us some stories about him, including his recent reading of the almanac. The doctor examined him and said, 'We have to perform his blood test and other tests. Let us take him to the hospital.' So we brought him to our hospital, where after doing all the tests the doctor found that he was absolutely free from any ailment; medically he was in perfect condition. The doctor was also surprised to find that he did not eat or drink, or answer nature's call, and that his body did not smell bad. Then I asked his students, 'What was that date in the almanac?' The date was Sankranti, when the sun moves from one constellation to another, considered a very sacred day. We asked his students to let him stay in the hospital and assured them that we would take care of him. They also stayed with us.

I found that on Sankranti exactly twenty-one days had elapsed since his condition became peculiar. Therefore I was always curious to watch him, remembering Sri Ramakrishna's pronouncement regarding twenty-one days.² Every day I visited him and stayed with him for two to three hours. Believe me, he did not move at all. We moved and lifted him, and gave him a bath without much difficulty. There was no resistance from him; he was just like a balloon. We were all surprised. We applied on him sandalwood oil and other ointments to prevent bedsores and body odour. There was no change, no movement, no talk from him. I tried to feed him glucose and lemon juice with a 'q-tip'. That is generally what we did. You could not insert a spoon in his mouth because that would irritate him. Therefore, I would press the 'q-tip' gently

and a little food went inside. There was no change at all in his condition.

Some brothers in the monastery remarked about me, 'He has become a mad fellow. He leaves his work and comes to this patient and sits by his side. What is going on?' They asked me, 'Do you believe in the prediction about twenty-one days?' 'I don't know,' I replied. 'Until it is proved I can't say.' 'You are wasting so much time,' they said. 'It isn't a waste of time,' I said. 'I look upon it as a great test.'

On the last day I came to see him. It was night. I sat by his bed on his right side and observed him minutely. I placed my hand on his leg. Exactly at 11:00 he turned his head towards me. With a sweet smile he placed his

I had really wondered how Sri Ramakrishna could be so definite about 'twenty-one days'. The body has its momentum. You have fed and taken care of it, and that momentum lasts for twenty-one days. Then it is all over because you are no longer feeding it. The same thing holds good for breathing.

hand on my hand, and then his head dropped. He passed away. I knew that was the end of it because it is consciousness that holds the head. With death the head drops because consciousness is withdrawn from the body. Without moving, I asked to bring the doctor. He came, examined the monk and pronounced him dead.

Now the question is this: I had really wondered how Sri Ramakrishna could be so definite about 'twenty-one days'. The body has its momentum. You have fed and taken care of it, and that momentum lasts for twenty-one days. Then it is all over because you are no longer feeding it. The same thing holds good for breathing. His breathing was very mild; you could hardly feel it. I placed

fibres near his nose to check his breath. In the beginning I could feel it; not afterwards. All these things show clearly what happens with someone who becomes one with the ultimate Reality, because there is nothing to bring him to the ordinary sense-consciousness, the worldly realm. There is no desire to breathe or inclination for any action. It is desire and ambition that can make him come back to the ordinary psyche. When there is nothing to draw him to the sense world, he merges in that pure Consciousness completely. If he has any desire to do good to others, that is a different question; otherwise he is merged into the Reality. But the body has its momentum. In his case we did not see any weakness, any change in the body, or any evidence of decomposition—nothing of the sort. He was very

Patients were more important to me than monkeys or pigeons or snakes. There were some snakes in a nearby bamboo bush, which had killed two or three boys. Nobody cared! We burnt all the bushes and killed forty snakes that day. We could not afford to lose human lives to snakes.

healthy. But after twenty-one days the body fell. It was a test case.

A Devotee Sri Ramakrishna Touched

A bearded old man used to visit the Sevashrama. He was a devotee by name Ashu Babu. He would visit the shrine, stay for a while without talking to anybody, and then go away. We did not know his whereabouts. One day I was walking along the bank of the Ganges with two other brothers and saw him coming out of a big house. 'I think he lives here,' I told them. 'Hello, Ashu Babu, you come to the Sevashrama often. Do you live here?' 'Yes,' he replied. We went inside and saw a big shrine with nothing more than a picture of Sri Ramakrishna. 'Ashu Babu, you never told us

anything about this. Tell us your story.' He had not told us anything about himself earlier because he was not inclined. When he was a little boy his grandmother or some relative took him to Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna touched him and took him on his lap. He always said, 'Sri Ramakrishna touched me. I want to know more about him. I have read books about him and have visited Belur Math and Dakshineswar. I was working before, but am retired now. I have sold everything and purchased a house here.' 'Why didn't you tell us all this before?' I asked. 'Well, there was nothing much to say,' he replied. We were very happy hearing his story. He visited me now and then at the hospital. He brought fruits and other things, said hello to me, went to shrine and then left. He was a very quiet person and before this hardly anyone knew who he was. He led a real good life.

Human Lives More Precious

Once there was a mad monkey around the Sevashrama that attacked many people and scratched them badly. It had its place at the corner where a big street and the lane leading to our hospital met. Many vic-

tims of the monkey received treatment from our hospital. A person had practically lost an eye. I told the police, 'There is a mad monkey around. You will have to kill it.' 'No, Swami, if I kill it they will kill me.' 'Why?' 'In this area we are forbidden to kill any animal.'³ There was a steady stream of monkey-bite patients; a little boy's body was completely scratched and bitten. But none was prepared to do anything.

We owned a gun and I asked my retainer, a schoolteacher, to bring it and shoot the monkey. 'No, I won't,' he said. 'Why?' 'If I shoot the monkey, people will kill me.' 'Give it to me,' I said. He showed me how to use the gun and I shot it down. It was as simple as that. My concern was more for the patients. They

should not suffer because of a monkey.

Afterwards some guest monks at the Sevashrama complained to Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj: 'Narayan has killed a monkey. Everybody is cursing him.' Maharaj wrote a beautiful letter to me: 'Don't worry about what others say. I'm glad you had the guts to do it. They only want to protect the letter of the law. Nobody cares for the results.' Later on when I saw Virajanandaji Maharaj he asked, 'Were you hurt at their (brother monks') complaint?' 'No, I wasn't. I knew it was my duty and I did it.' 'And you had the nerve to do it,' he said. 'I couldn't help it because I saw patients coming to the hospital, scratched and bitten by the monkey. What should I have done? Keep quiet? I couldn't.' 'You did the right thing,' he assured me. 'Don't worry about what others say.' Even when everyone else condemned me, I never worried, because I was convinced that what I did was right.

Then there were the pigeons. They were in the hospital building, dropping everything on the food and the beds. In the process of removing them, before putting nets there, some were killed. I was cursed! They said, 'You killed the pigeons?' One brahmacharin said, 'Don't shout before him; he will kill *you*.' Another brother defended it saying, 'Nobody did anything when the beds were soiled and all were complaining about that. Why did they let the pigeons in?'

Patients were more important to me than monkeys or pigeons or snakes. There were some snakes in a nearby bamboo bush, which

had killed two or three boys. Nobody cared! We burnt all the bushes and killed forty snakes that day. We could not afford to lose human lives to snakes. We destroyed the bushes completely, dug up the place, got rid of everything inside, levelled the area and made it a lawn. People were afraid of us. I said, 'First come human lives.' We had to kill those animals. We had the boldness to do that. Arjuna was asked to kill the people arrayed against him. 'Get up and fight,' Krishna admonished him. Did he not have mercy on them? He did, but he also had his duty; and that lay in killing them. That was the only way.

(to be continued)

Notes and References

1. The property was subsequently disposed of by the headquarters.
2. In the top of the head is the seventh plane. When the mind rises there, one goes into samādhi. Then the Brahmajnāni directly perceives Brahman. But in that state his body does not last many days. He remains unconscious of the outer world. If milk is poured into his mouth, it runs out. Dwelling on this plane of consciousness, he gives up his body in twenty-one days.' —M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985), 151.
3. Hardwar and Rishikesh are considered very holy. Killing animals is forbidden there; not even fishing is permitted.

When a Man Becomes Free ...

It is not that when a man becomes free, he will stop and become a dead lump; but he will be more active than any other being, because every other being acts only under compulsion, he alone through freedom.

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 5.286

Swami Vivekananda's Gospel of Work as Worship

C S RAMAKRISHNAN

Swami Vivekananda has been described as the cyclonic monk. Like a whirlwind he swept everything before him. He was dynamism incarnate. It was as if in him Energy had taken a human form. Yet he was a perfect monk. A monk is calm and serene. He stands for peace and rest. He is shanti personified. How to reconcile these two contradictory aspects of his personality? More than that, how to interpret his thundering declaration that work itself can be worship, that intense activity can be silent adoration?

Who Was Swamji?

To understand this paradox we must remember who Swamiji really was. He was the sage Nara, whom Sri Ramakrishna, the sage Narayana, brought down from the *saptarshi mandala* to launch a great mission on earth. The mission, which is today known as the Ramakrishna Movement, is a divine one. It is

Naren prayed only for vairagya, bhakti and jnana, for he felt the Mother's Presence. She was no longer charming poetry but a thrilling, undeniable Reality. He became the Mother's child. Henceforth She empowered him.

ennobling activity powered by the Divine. Nara immersed in *tapas* had to become Naren, the world-mover. His intense worship had to be expressed in terrific work. And this moulding would be done by the master pot-maker, Sri Ramakrishna. The duo, Nara-Narayana,

working in tandem, would set in motion the dharma chakra for the new age.

His First Meeting with Sri Ramakrishna

For an edifice to be stable the foundation must be solid. The Ramakrishna Movement had to be raised on the bedrock of divinity. For that the architect, Naren, had to make sure of the existence of God. Hence it was that Naren met most of the leaders in Calcutta and asked them the challenging question 'Have you seen God?' None was able to give him a positive answer, till, prompted by his teacher Hastie, he met the saint of Dakshineswar. Sri Ramakrishna unhesitatingly said, 'Not only have I seen God, but I can make you also see Him, if you practise the necessary discipline.' Here was a scientist speaking. If after performing an experiment a scientist discovers a truth, any other scientist in any other part of the world doing the same experiment should be able to arrive at the same truth. If Ramakrishna had seen God, Naren also must be able to see Him. Naren was bowled over by the Master's assurance and sat at his feet for the next six years. He questioned the Master at every stage so that finally he was sure of every step in the long trek to the ultimate Reality.

In his intimate interaction with his guru there came an interesting turning point. One day the Master was explaining to the disciples the gist of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's message: One should show compassion to all creatures. Hardly had he uttered the word 'compassion'

than he went into samadhi. Coming back to a semi-conscious state of mind, he mused, 'Talk of compassion for beings! Insignificant creatures that you are, how can you show compassion to beings? Who are you to show compassion? You wretch, who are you to bestow it? No, no; it is not compassion to Jivas but service to them as Siva.'¹

All present there heard those words, but it was only Naren who realized in a flash the revolutionary import of the Master's insight. Here was a sweet mingling of jnana and bhakti, dhyana and karma. The Master was blazing a new trail to the Infinite. Naren declared to the others, 'If the divine Lord ever grants me an opportunity, I'll proclaim everywhere in the world this wonderful truth I have heard today.' (940)

Infusion of Mother's Power

Naren understood that the Master was dedicating him to a life of service, but before the concept of service could take off some hurdles had to be crossed. There was the question of energy. The type of service envisaged by the Master required tremendous power, shakti. And who could gift this shakti except the Divine Mother, Kali. But at that time Naren, under the influence of the Brahmo Samaj, did not believe in image worship. The Bhavatarini in the Dakshineswar temple meant nothing to him. The Master was clear that

Naren should acknowledge the Mother to receive from Her the power needed to execute the mission. So he fabricated a drama. Naren's father died, leaving the family on the streets. Naren requested the Master to pray to the Mother for relief. The Master asked him to make the prayer himself; Mother would surely respond. We know the drama that followed. Three times did Naren stand before Bhavatarini, but not even once could he pray

for material succour to his family; he prayed only for *vairagya*, bhakti and jnana, for he felt the Mother's Presence. She was no longer charming poetry but a thrilling, undeniable Reality. He became the Mother's child. Henceforth She empowered him.

The empowerment was again effected through the Master, who was, in fact, non-different from Mother Kali. A few days before his mahasamadhi Sri Ramakrishna transmitted all his immense spiritual powers to Naren.

The Path Becomes Clear

Still Naren was not sure of the structure of the mission the Master wanted him to undertake. In what way was he to translate the concept of service into action? That became clear to him as he made his *parikramana*, circumambulation, of the holy land of India. For seven years he walked the length and breadth of the country, mixing freely with princes and paupers, scholars and ignoramus. He was thrilled to gaze at the rich cul-

Sri Ramakrishna is hailed as the prophet of the harmony of all religions. His is not an armchair philosophy. As a true scientist he experimented with all religions with meticulous care and discovered that all spiritual paths lead to the same Supreme. Likewise Swamiji is hailed as the integrator of the four yogas.

ture and spiritual heritage of the *punya-bhumi*, and at the same time saddened to see the abject poverty and weaknesses in the national character. His odyssey culminated at land's end, Kanyakumari, where the Mother gave him a brilliant vision that revealed the nature of the work he had to do. It was this vision that catapulted him to the West, made him the hero of the Chicago Parliament of Religions and enabled him to pour out the message of

Vedanta to an eager Western elite. And returning to India, he put his plan into practice by organizing the twin institutions of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, with the slogan '*Atmano mokshartham, jagad hitaya cha*, for the individual's salvation and society's welfare.' The national ideals of India are RENUNCIATION and SERVICE. Intensify her in those channels, and the rest will take care of itself,'² he declared.

This revolutionary idea of equating worship with work, *tapas* with *seva*, naturally invited a lot of opposition from many quarters. Even some of his own brother disciples resisted this innovation. They thought Swamiji was deviating from the path chalked out by their Great Master. But soon they found out

The fruits belong to the Lord. When you surrender your puny will to His almighty will the result is always auspicious. To err is human, but the Divine makes no mistake.

that it was not Swamiji's razor-sharp intellect that was planning, but his huge heart bleeding for the poor and the downtrodden. The brother disciples also became his ardent co-workers in the new mission of selfless service.

Traditional Misconception Dispelled

We must remember that down the ages the prevailing idea among both the learned and the ignorant is that to worship the Supreme the aspirant must dissociate himself from all worldly ties. Vedanta demands an utter ostracism of society and humanity. The *sadhaka* must regard the world and his fellow men as impediments in the spiritual path. To worship and attain the Divine, worldly work must be scrupulously discarded. The *mumukshu*, the seeker of the Infinite, must be asocial.

It is this tremendous misconception, a heartless perception of the nature of spirituality, which is swept aside by Sri Ramakrishna's revelation. '*Siva jnane jiva seva*,' he declared.

Service to fellow beings is the way in which realization of the Supreme should express itself. God-consciousness means one is able to see God in all beings and in all circumstances. God is both immanent and transcendent. It is He alone who has become all these diverse creatures. So how can the earnest seeker cut himself away from others? To insulate oneself from the rest of humanity is sheer arrogance, an insult to the Divine.

Service of God in Man: The Master Shows the Way

Sri Ramakrishna, whose natural tendency was to be immersed in samadhi, himself showed how to see God everywhere. While on a pilgrimage at Deoghar with Mathur Babu, he saw a group of poor people in dire distress. He asked Mathur to give them food, clothing and oil for their heads. When Mathur hesitated Sri Ramakrishna threatened to drop out from the pilgrimage.

How could one worship God and at the same time neglect His children? Mathur was compelled to serve those poor people as part of his worship of the Divine.

Swamiji's Practical Vedanta

This is Vedanta in action, what Swamiji later called Practical Vedanta. He used almost the same words as the Master. Sri Ramakrishna said that it is the Lord who moves about in the guise of men, sometimes a saint, sometimes a knave, sometimes a libertine. But all of them are God—and nothing but God. Echoing the Master Swamiji said,

Look upon every man, woman, and everyone as God. You cannot help anyone, you can only serve: serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege. ... Do it only as a worship. ... The poor and the miserable are for our salvation, so that we may serve the Lord, coming in the shape of the diseased, coming in the shape of the lunatic, the leper, and

the sinner! (3.246-7)

The only God to worship is the human soul in the human body. Of course all animals are temples too, but man is the highest, the Taj Mahal of temples. If I cannot worship in that, no other temple will be of any advantage. (2.321)

Where should you go to seek for God—are not all the poor, the miserable, the weak, Gods? Why not worship them first? Why go to dig a well on the shores of the Ganga? (5.51)

Swamiji, the Integrator of the Four Yogas

Sri Ramakrishna is hailed as the prophet of the harmony of all religions. His is not an armchair philosophy. As a true scientist he experimented with all religions with meticulous care and discovered that all spiritual paths lead to the same Supreme. Likewise Swamiji is hailed as the integrator of the four yogas. He showed that jnana yoga takes us to the One, without a second, appearing as the many. By control of the wayward mind raja yoga ensures the Peace that passeth understanding. Bhakti yoga leads us to the Bliss of union with the Beloved. And karma yoga confers on us utter Fulfilment. This truth Swamiji encapsulated in the following *mahavakya*:

Each soul is potentially divine.

The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal.

Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy—by one or more or all of these—and be free.

This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details. (1.124)

Swamiji's 'Ishtayoga'

Swamiji shows that all the four yogas in different ways lead to the same supreme Goal. Each sadhaka may choose the yoga suited to his aptitude, but should not decry the other yogas followed by other sadhakas. As a matter of fact, whatever the yoga adopted by an aspi-

rant, he will find that the other yogas too mesh with his yoga. A true bhakta will revere all deities, but will be specially devoted to one particular manifestation of the Divine— his *ishta-devata*, Chosen Deity. Likewise we see that for Swamiji too there is an '*ishta-yoga*' among the yogas. It is karma yoga that gets highlighted in his mission. '*Tasmad yogi bhava, be therefore a yogi*', the Lord exhorts Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgita*.³ Swamiji too wants his followers to become karma yogis. Why?

Misery—Its Cause and Antidote

Work, karma, is all-pervasive, universal. No one remains without doing work even for a moment, points out the Lord in the *Gita*. Ev-

Work loses its sting when it is offered as service. Work becomes the medium through which we communicate with God. It becomes worship. Instead of trying to avoid work we take to the work of service with great enthusiasm and delight.

erybody has to be working. There is no escaping it. To achieve anything or to preserve what has been achieved, work is indispensable. *Yoga-kshema* can be had only through karma. But the trouble is, karma binds. It is like a seed. By planting a seed we grow a tree. In turn the tree produces fruits—which carry more seeds that produce more trees. It is an unending process, like the story of the demon Raktabija in the *Devi Mahatmya*: each drop of blood that fell from his body brought forth a new demon. Likewise, each karma performed sprouts a plethora of new karmas.

There is a grimmer aspect to karma. A desire prompts us to make a plan and execute it. We expect sweet fruits from that karma, but often the fruits turn out to be bitter. We get frustrated. That generates anger and, as the *Gita* points out, losing our self-possession we get deluded and slide into ruin. The desire-

prompted karma ends in disaster. Sorrow crowns our efforts. Why should our well-laid schemes go awry?

Vedanta explains that it is the ego behind the desire that is the cause of misery. 'I' and 'mine' lead to grief. We are reminded of Aesop's fly which sits on a wheel of the chariot and exclaims 'What a lot of dust I raise!' In our egotism we think that we are the doers and the

Renunciation has always been looked upon with great respect in our land. By equating renunciation with service India can be raised. To renounce you need not seek the solitude of a forest. You can renounce in the dust and din of the marketplace.

result of an action depends on us. This is a myopic view. The *Gita* points out that the *karma-phala* depends on a number of factors. The individual's effort is only one of them. And supervening all is *daiva*, fate. Everything happens according to God's will. Our task is to be willing instruments in the Divine hand. *Nimitta matram bhava*, the Lord tells Arjuna. (11.33) A poet writes a poem. It is literally true that it is the pen that does the actual writing. But on that score can the pen claim authorship of the poem? The pen's role is to write smoothly. The more it cooperates, the more the poet will use the pen, and the more the poetry that flows out of it.

That is the secret. Consider all work as worship of the Divine; do the work meticulously, but do not bother about the result. '*Karmani eva adhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachana*. Only to work you have the right, not to the fruits thereof.' (2.47) The fruits belong to the Lord. When you surrender your puny will to His almighty will the result is always auspicious. To err is human, but the Divine makes no mistake.

Nishkama karma, selfless work dedicated to God, therefore, is the means of getting out of

the bondage inherent in work. We are painfully aware how much tension is created by the tasks facing us. When one thing generates tension, we try to neutralize it by performing another. But this is like trying to put out a fire by pouring ghee on it. The tension only mounts and gets more unmanageable. Vedanta says, avoid all tension by dedicating all work, big and small, to Him. Practise the presence of God by performing all your activities as His worship. Then there is no fatigue or frustration, discontent or ill-at-ease. Tremendous energy flows into you and you are able to take up any formidable task.

Work loses its sting when it is offered as service. Work becomes the medium through

which we communicate with God. It becomes worship. Instead of trying to avoid work we take to the work of service with great enthusiasm and delight. Then, as the *Gita* puts it, we see work in 'no work' and 'no work' in work. 'Without attachment to the fruits of action, ever content and dependent on none, he verily does nothing, even though engaged in actions. Free from desires, with his mind controlled and surrendering all possessions, he incurs no sin through mere bodily activity.' (4.20-1)

Renunciation Coupled with Service

Swamiji's genius found a way of making this idea of selfless service applicable to contemporary India. Renunciation has always been looked upon with great respect in our land. By equating renunciation with service India can be raised. To renounce you need not seek the solitude of a forest. You can renounce in the dust and din of the marketplace.

Devote your whole lives to the cause of the redemption of these three hundred millions, going down and down every day. (5.17)

Let all other vain gods disappear for the time from our minds. This is the only god that is awake, our own race—'everywhere his hands,

everywhere his feet, everywhere his ears, he covers everything.' All other gods are sleeping. What vain gods shall we go after and yet cannot worship the god that we see all round us, the Virat? When we have worshipped this, we shall be able to worship all the other gods. (3.300-1)

Go, all of you, wherever there is an outbreak of plague or famine, or wherever the people are in distress, and mitigate their sufferings. At the most you may die in the attempt—what of that? How many like you are being born and dying like worms every day? What difference does that make to the world at large? Die you must, but have a great ideal to die for, and it is better to die with a great ideal in life. (5.383-4)

The Gist of All Worship

With trumpet voice he calls:

I bequeath to you, young men, this sympathy, this struggle for the poor, the ignorant, the oppressed. Go now this minute to the temple of Parthasarathi, and before Him who was friend to the poor and lowly cowherds of Gokula, who never shrank to embrace the Pariah Guhaka, who accepted the invitation of a prostitute in preference to that of nobles and saved her in His incarnation as Buddha—yea, down on your faces before Him, and make a great sacrifice, the sacrifice of a whole life for them, for whom He comes from time to time, whom He loves above all, the poor, the lowly, the oppressed. (5.16-7)

This is the gist of all worship—to be pure and to do good to others. He who sees Shiva in the poor, in the weak, and in the diseased, really worships Shiva; and if he sees Shiva only in the image, his worship is but preliminary. He who has served and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him, without thinking of his caste, or creed, or race, or anything, with him Shiva is more pleased than with the man who sees Him only in temples. (3.141-2)

The Foundation of the Ramakrishna Order

Serving God in man is the foundation on which the beautiful edifice of the Ramakri-

shna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission has been raised, and the massive selfless work done by its workers in the fields of *daridra-narayana-seva* (service of God the poor) is now part of history. At one time, orthodox sadhus of Hardwar used to look down on the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission with contempt,

Swamiji's gospel of work as worship has made such irresistible impact that today even hoary orthodox monasteries undertake some form of social service as part of their religious discipline. Worship through selfless work and be free, is the mantra for the modern age.

because they personally attended on the sick and the dying. They called them *bhangi* sadhus, sweeper monks. But with the passage of time the value of the sweeper monks' selfless service has become apparent—so much that today no function of the Hardwar sannyasins begins before the arrival of the Ramakrishna Mission monks!⁴

Swamiji's gospel of work as worship has made such irresistible impact that today even hoary orthodox monasteries undertake some form of social service as part of their religious discipline. Worship through selfless work and be free, is the mantra for the modern age. *

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Half a Decade in the Enchanting Environs of Along

A Wistful Look Back at the Early Days of the Ramakrishna Mission School

SWAMI KIRTIDANANDA

1. The Backdrop

1 5 April 1946 is, indeed, a memorable day in my life. That was when I entered the portals of the Ramakrishna Ashrama in Bangalore with a decision to embrace the monastic life in the Ramakrishna Order. If, again, I were to be asked what other day or dates stand out in my memory as equally outstanding, if not more, I should definitely mention, among many, 25 August 1969, the day I landed at Along; and 6 December 1969, the day we moved to our new premises atop the hill, where the school stands today, from the temporary bamboo structures that housed the school and hostel quarters down below in the present playground. The next five years, exact to date, that I spent at Along were days of great expectation and hope, very exciting—exciting because we were every moment filled with the thought that we were involved in a work so dear to the heart of Swami Vivekananda. They were, indeed, days full of merriment and joy, with all their ups and downs, though not attended with unhindered, uniform success at every step.

The Precursor of Developments in Arunachal Pradesh

The preliminary work of the Mission had actually started three years before I went there, in 1966, and the foundation stone of the buildings to house the education complex had been laid by the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi, on 25 December 1967. We

could say, however, that the real foundation of the work had been laid long before by Swami Vivekananda himself as far back as 1893, months before his triumphal appearance at the Chicago Parliament of Religions on 11 September that year. For had he not predicted even then that 'if and when the British should leave India there would be a great danger of India's being conquered by the Chinese',¹ when none, in his wildest of dreams, could have imagined such a thing happening, close as the two countries were to each other? And did his words not come true? Did not the Chinese invade India in 1962, maybe with the idea, however bizarre it may look at this distance of time or even then, of conquering it, as Swamiji said? And was not this the precursor of all the developments that have taken place since then in the north-east region of Arunachal Pradesh (at the time known as NEFA, North-Eastern Frontier Agency), where the invasion took place; and of the Ramakrishna Mission (and also the Ramakrishna Sarada Mission subsequently) coming on to the scene to be the proud participants thereof?

The Chinese invasion, no doubt, was an unhappy event, a dark chapter in the history of the good relations between the two countries. Why in the first place the Chinese embarked upon this misadventure at all, or why, having undertaken the unenviable task, they suddenly buckled under and withdrew from

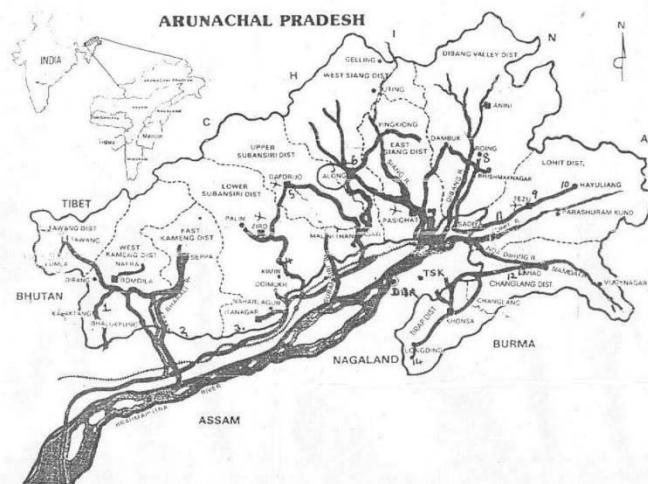
it remains even now shrouded in utter mystery. For they were in hot pursuit of the Indian jawans, who were fleeing for their life, beaten hollow and square in an unequal battle, and apparently were at the door of victory. The explanation is not far to seek. The most fruitful and plausible of all the attempts to solve the mystery is what Mr Mullick, the then Director of the Border Security Force, rightly pointed out in his three-volume work on the subject. The Himalayas, as Kalidasa has hinted in his *Kumarasambhava* invocatory verse, even today stand as an impregnable barrier between India and the enemy hordes who choose to set their eyes on her. If the Chinese had continued brazenly in *this*, their reckless misadventure, their armies would soon have been inextricably caught up in the plains of India in the ensuing winter. They would have been cut off and deprived of all logistic support from their mainland. For a thick wall of snow would have built up over the Himalayas, and the Indian army, for all its poor showing earlier, would have made mincemeat of them in the familiar surroundings of their own homeland. So they beat a hasty retreat, though putting on outwardly a brave face, as if they were doing it out of grace and mercy. Having shown India and the world at large the strength of their army and what they were capable of doing, they might have been satisfied also. Their main purpose and intention in launching the attack, most likely, had also been served.

Be that as it may. Whatever it is, it was a blessing in disguise as far as India as a whole was concerned, and Arunachal in particular. India can now boast of a well-equipped army, capable of taking on anyone in the world, and Arunachal of being a forward-looking modern state, having emerged from the primitive condition in which it was then. Every cloud

has a silver lining, and after the severe winter must come the spring. How true!

The Ramakrishna Mission Steps in

Interesting stories are told about the situation prevailing in the area at the time. One such, immediately relevant to our subject, speaks of how the whole town of Along was agog with rumours of the Chinese army landing there any moment. Preparations were afoot by the local administration and the military to shift the population of the area, for strategic reasons, to safer regions. The local tribal people were, however, opposed to the move. They would not understand the subtleties of military strategy or tactics or manoeuvres and



all that tall talk. For them the military was there to fight, and the civil administration to protect them against all odds, not to run away from the scene of danger in the face of threat to their safety. It was as simple as that to their unsophisticated, plain tribal logic. So, endless discussions went on one whole night between the local tribal leaders and the officers of the military and the local civil administration. The latter were somehow able to convince them of the need to evacuate the place in their own interest and in the interest of the country. However, as luck would have it, the very next day

the Chinese announced suspension of all hostilities and the return of their soldiers to their barracks. But the faith of the tribals in the capacity of our military and the civil administration to protect their interests and their safety in times of need, or even in normal times, dipped to the lowest ebb. And the development or burgeoning of a Nagaland-like situation was very much in the offing. It was then that the thoughtful among the administrators thought of bringing the Ramakrishna Mission into the picture to smooth things over and approached the Government of India for the purpose. The



Ramakrishna Mission, Along: A Panoramic View

latter approved the idea immediately. The authorities of the Ramakrishna Mission headquarters at Belur Math also readily agreed, seeing the gravity of the situation and the importance of the work. First they deputed Swami Bhavyananda, who was then the head of our centre at Shillong, which was then the headquarters of the NEFA Administration, too, to assess the situation and report. Subsequently, they sent another of our swamis, Swami Nageshananda, now no more with us, to actually start the work.

The swami arrived there sometime in 1966, maybe in March or April. As he told me before my departure from Calcutta—where

he was convalescing from a paralytic stroke, which had necessitated my going to Along in his place—he went there as if into a wilderness—a Robinson Crusoe thrown in on an out-of-the-way island—not knowing what to do there or where to begin. However, after a long discussion, or a series of discussions, with the then Deputy Commissioner of Siang district (it was then one single district, as I said earlier, now divided into two), Mr K K Banerjee, whose guest he was, and with the local tribal leaders, prominent among them being Mr Boken Ete, it was decided to start the work in a small way with a partly residential English medium primary school on an experimental basis, and proceed slowly, depending on the response from the people and the students.

The History behind the English Medium School

First, why, of all things, an English medium school? It has a history behind. Years before, in order to infuse the lost confidence of the local tribal people in the Indian ad-

ministration, a party of local leaders, headed by Sri Boken Ete, was taken on a Bharat Darshan tour, to give them an idea of what the real India was—the greatness and magnitude of its cultural history. Mr Boken Ete, as he was called, was the Political Assistant of the Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh, a post held by a prominent tribal leader in each district to help the administration in carrying on its official duties. In the course of their tour, they were naturally taken to meet the topmost dignitary of India, the President, who at that time happened to be Dr Radhakrishnan. There were many others, too, who had come to meet the President. Dr Radhakrishnan spoke to a good

many of them. When the time allocated for the interview was over and the ADC signalled Dr Radhakrishnan about it, the latter turned back, unceremoniously, to return to his chambers, without saying a word to these people from Arunachal Pradesh. Mr Boken Ete, the leader of the party, felt deeply hurt, not to say offended, at Dr Radhakrishnan's behaviour. He took it as a personal affront, if not an insult to the dignity of the entire population of Arunachal. 'Thahro! (Stop!)', he shouted in his broken, unpolished Hindi, remonstrating the President for this act of misdemeanour and lack of ordinary courtesy on his part in his usual outspoken manner, characteristic of the tribal people in general. 'Tum kaise admi ho? Ham itni dur se aye hein tumko dekhne ke liye; tumhe hamare rashtrapati, hamare neta, hamare

you', not realizing he had unknowingly made a faux pas thereby. 'O!' Boken said unabashedly, 'Tum hindi nahi jante ho rashtrapati hokar! Tab hamko kyon assami sikhne ko, assami me padhne ko, hindi sikhne ko bolte ho? (Oh! You are the President of India and yet do not know Hindi! Then why do you advise us to learn Assamese and Hindi?)'

Those were days when Assamese was being popularized in those regions as the medium of instruction, much to the chagrin and annoyance of the people there. The first great encounter of these people with India, that is Bharat, was, indeed, a tragedy, and the plan of the people who organized the tour to give a good impression of India to these people had misfired. The second one turned out to be more disastrous. They were then taken to see

the Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi. Unlike Dr Radhakrishnan, she was, of course, full of warmth and friendly feeling in welcoming and talking to them. But she got off on the wrong foot at the very outset by raising the topic of Assamese as the medium of instruction, which was agitating the minds of the tribals of the area at the time, and by asking them to study

'What kind of a person are you? ... We have come from such a long distance, all the way from NEFA, to meet you, the Head of our state and our great leader, regarding you as the Lord Himself, and you are going away not speaking a word with us, but only with people who knew English! How shameful!'

bhagavan samajhke. Lekin tumne ek bat bhi hamare sath nahi bola, sirph jo angrezi jante hein unke sath batchit karke aisa hi chale ja rahe ho, kaise admi ho tum? (What kind of a person are you? How ill bred and ungracious! We have come from such a long distance, all the way from NEFA, to meet you, the Head of our state and our great leader, regarding you as the Lord Himself, and you are going away not speaking a word with us, but only with people who knew English! How shameful of you!) All were stunned, not to speak of the President himself, who surely would have been taken aback by these blunt words. However, he turned back and muttered an unconvincing apology in a faltering voice: 'You see, I am from the south, I do not know Hindi, so I could not speak with

Hindi along with it, it being the national language. Mr Boken Ete was irritated, and angrily protested, again in his blunt manner: 'Accha! Hamko hindi sikhne ko bol rahe ho, assami sikhne ko bol rahe ho! Lekin tumhare bacchon ko kyon Doon School me bheja? Kyon unko England me bheja hai? Unko kitni hindi sikhayi hai? (Well! You are haranguing us to study Assamese, the language of the neighbouring region and Hindi, the national language. But what have you done with your own children? You sent them to Doon School, where English is the medium of instruction, and now have sent them to England, where English is the prime language! Why?)' Mrs Indira Gandhi was aghast at his sharp reaction, but had no answer to

give. Boken's arguments were, indeed, unavailable.

Anyway, immediately on return, Boken Ete started telling people, shouting from housetops at the top of his voice: '*Angrezi sikho, nahi honese tumko kutte ki maphik dekhenge bahar jane se! Hindi bhi sikhma, kyonki vah hamara rashtrabhasha hai aur uski bhi zarurat hai. Lekin angrezi us-se bhi zyada zarurat hai.* (Learn English! Otherwise, you will be treated like a dog even in India if you happen to go out of your region, not to mention elsewhere. Learn Hindi also because it is our national language. But there is no salvation for you unless you learn English, which is the international language.)' And in his address on the occasion of the inauguration of the Ramakrishna Mission, he declared publicly: '*Ham Ramakrishna Mission ko idhar hamko angrezi sikhane ke liye le aye hein. Jis din ve usko bandh kar denge us din ham unko idhar se hatayenge!* (We have brought the Ramakrishna Mission here to teach English, and shall keep them here as long as they do that. The moment they stop it, we shall drive them away from here!)' Of course, Ramakrishna Mission there and elsewhere in Arunachal Pradesh has been doing that, and *something more*.

The Tribals' Attitude towards Women

But the tribal people were not to be taken in by promises, and were wary and suspicious. First, because a celibate monk with a tonsured head! Monks and celibacy! The terms were incomprehensible to them, to say the least. Not to them alone, but to many of the enlightened or the so-called educated too in the other places. Then, what to speak of them, in whose society having more than one wife was the accepted norm, exceptions only proving the rule? And

then teetotaller monks at that, as both myself and my predecessor were! We never smoked or drank, and were vegetarians to the core—to add to their confusion and consternation—who never touched even eggs or meat, leave alone beef and alcohol, which were all part of their daily menu! Worse still, monks who bore a close resemblance to their girls, what with their shaven heads, looking, partly at least, like the dressed-up hair of the girls in one of the two tribes who inhabited the area, the Minyongs, and their coloured clothes reminding one of the sarongs worn by their womenfolk, particularly of the other main tribe there, the Gallongs, colourwise as much as in the mode of wearing—girls, who, in their social set-up, were nothing but chattel to be used for different purposes: one for cooking, another for field work, still another for enjoyment, and so on. That is all, nothing more, nothing less; a mere cat's paw in the hands of men; unworthy of anything better, below par as compared to themselves in intelligence or

Unlike Dr Radhakrishnan, Mrs Gandhi was, of course, full of warmth and friendly feeling in welcoming and talking to them. But she got off on the wrong foot at the very outset by raising the topic of Assamese as the medium of instruction, which was agitating the minds of the tribals of the area at the time, and by asking them to study Hindi along with it, it being the national language.

talents or brain power!

We can get an inkling of their thinking vis-à-vis the status of women in their community from the following small incident that happened during my tenure as the head of the centre. Though trivial in itself, it shows the workings of the tribal culture. Ours was a co-educational institution, and I used to insist

on both boys and girls in our school tucking in their shirts and blouses in their shorts and skirts respectively, to give them a smart, sprightly look. After a time, however, I observed that while the boys obeyed, the girls were wayward and indifferent. That is, they did so only when I was in sight, but would leave the blouses hanging loose outside when I was out of sight. I was puzzled by their behaviour. Maybe, I thought, that was the fashion of the day, of which I knew nothing. But one of the lady devotees, who taught them music, drama and dance, told me that it had nothing to do with the prevailing fashion. One evening, I asked them about it. Why were they so disrespectful and disobedient? Their reply was amusing. 'No, Swamiji,' they said, 'it's not that! We are not doing this deliberately. When you are nearby, the boys are afraid, and keep quiet. But, as soon as you are out of sight, they are in their element and forbid us from wearing the dress as you want, threatening us with dire consequences if we act contrarily. Wearing the dress that way, they claim, is their, the boys', prerogative and privilege, to which we, the girls, are not entitled. So, we have no other go but to act according to their wishes in your absence.' I was astonished at their reply. However, it was indicative of the tribal perception of things. If that was the attitude of the boys towards girls, what about the elders? So, no wonder that they were distrustful and cautious about our motives and intentions, and had their own reservations about our capacity to deliver the goods—we who in appearance were no better than their girls, as it seemed to them. They had seen one or two Christian priests, tiptop in

their Western dress and attire, and they looked at us and our actions through *their* eyes. How it all changed within the matter of a few days and they began to see things in a different light, and the struggles we had to go through to bring about this change; and how we ourselves in the process underwent an amazing transformation shedding many of our age-old prejudices, is the fascinating saga of Arunachal Pradesh on the rise, though still in the womb, the subject of this unpretentious write-up.

Disabusing Tribal Notions about Monks

In this arduous task of disabusing the



Prime Minister Indira Gandhi laying the foundation stone of the Ramakrishna Mission School

minds of the tribals of the wrong notions they had about us and bringing out the said transformation in their way of thinking, the part played by Mr Boken Ete was, indeed, invaluable. Nor can the help received from the Government initiative and backing be discounted in the least. Boken Ete was the foremost and most influential leader of the tribals of the district, and in the running of the administration his assistance was a must, an inevitable desideratum. Though uneducated and illiterate, he had a keen intellect and was endowed with a

good deal of common sense and power of understanding. Prior to Indian independence he was an attendant of the British officers, and, during the course of his service, had acquired to some extent their efficiency in work and organizing capacity. He was the first to understand us in the proper perspective, and he would put across our ideas and ideals to his people in their own language, in his own style. About our celibacy and puritanism in food and drink or dress, he would say: 'They are verily Donyi-Polo (the Sun-God and the Moon-God they worshipped), their veritable representatives. So, they neither marry nor drink nor dance nor eat meat.' They would understand, nod assent, and applaud.

As for the Government, they had brought us in there for their own purpose, or purposes, and it was incumbent on them to extend their all-out support to us, and they did it to the extent possible. A section of the tribals, for all the trouble Boken took to explain things, was still suspicious that we were there with some ulterior motive, to spread Hinduism and evangelize. Had not Verrier Elwin, in his book *A Philosophy for NEFA* issued a note of warning to them by inserting the following subsidiary lines under the main caption of a chapter: 'Mother cow stands between Hinduism and the tribals (or tribal society)'? Besides, as already stated, the tribals hardly had any idea of the renunciate monk, nor any respect or regard for the ideal of simple living and high thinking that monkhood signified. They could understand and appreciate grandeur, ostentation, power and position. A deputy commissioner they could admire and adore, or an assistant commissioner; a district medical or forest officer; a chief engineer or superintending engineer. They could comprehend a governor or chief commissioner; a chief minister or prime minister; the President or Vice President of a nation. That was well within the grasp of their intellect. But a man in rags with nowhere to lay his head, and yet one who

claimed to serve and work for their uplift! That was unintelligible.

The Fount of Our Inspiration

As far as we were concerned, it hardly mattered what they thought of us or how they looked at our work. We were least bothered by it. Our mission was clear-cut and definite. We had been assigned a job, and our attention was focused on it. And there were the great exhortations of Swami Vivekananda to inspire and goad us on:

The duty of every aristocracy is to dig its own grave, and the sooner it does so, the better.²

This life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others. (4.363)

You, the upper classes of India, do you think you are alive? You are but mummies ten thousand years old! ... Ay, on your bony fingers are some priceless rings of jewel, treasured up by your ancestors, and within the embrace of your stinking corpses are preserved a good many ancient treasure-chests ... pass them on to your heirs, ay, do it as quickly as you can. You merge yourself in the void and disappear, and let new India arise in your place ... These common people have suffered oppression for thousands of years—suffered it without even a murmur. ... Throw those treasure-chests of yours and those jewelled rings among them, as soon as you can; and you vanish into air, and be seen no more—only keep your ears open. (7.327-8)

And many such! Personally speaking, with these words on our lips and constantly reverberating through our minds, we could surmount with ease the innumerable difficulties and hurdles. Driven by these words, we were as if possessed, possessed with infinite energy and power. The one thought that prevailed uppermost in the mind was this: how to make a success of this work that had been started with so much pomp and publicity. Specially, Swamiji's soul-stirring words: 'Aristocracy! dig your own grave and work for the backward and the unprivileged' ringing in our ears day in and day out, we could not but ask our-

selves: Was not here a golden opportunity to redeem the pledge of Swami Vivekananda, made on our behalf to the nation; on behalf of us, the privileged ones belonging to the upper echelons of society, born with a silver spoon; who have had the best of life, and on whom the die had been cast by Providence itself, as though by a divine decree?

How the Government Upheld the Greatness of the Mission

But the Government and the administrative machinery were anxious and worried. It was they who had invited us, and they could not afford the work to fail, nor the Mission or us, the Mission's representatives, to be belittled in any manner. So they went out of their way to project the image of the Mission, and of us monks who represented it, in proper light and perspective: that we monks of the Mission were men of culture, hailing from well-to-do families, and educated, who had renounced the world voluntarily out of a passion for the service of mankind, and not the vagabonds you find roaming about the streets of India for a morsel of food or a piece of cloth, nor the castaway ragamuffins of society; that the Mission itself was a worldwide organization with a universal message of service of humanity, irrespective of caste, creed, nationality, race or religion, with its branches spread over not only the different parts of India but the other continents, and sub-continents of the earth, too. But the tribals were not to be beguiled by mere verbiage. So the administration took great pains to show in action that they meant what they said. We always had pride of place at all the functions organized and dinner parties thrown, either by the civil administration or the military. The idea was that the tribals would automatically be convinced that we are somebody worthy of re-

gard and veneration when the officers, whom the tribals addressed as *nigams*, and looked upon with great awe and respect, honoured us. That was the train of their thoughts. So, at a function, our place of honour would be next to whoever was the highest dignitary: if it was the Deputy Commissioner, next to him; if the Governor, next to him; if the Prime Minister, next to him; and so on. Others would relegate themselves automatically into lower positions, setting aside all the rules of diplomatic protocol. So in the case of the military.

Parties Could Not Be Parted with

While the concern of the administration in this regard was quite legitimate and understandable, it very often put us monks into an embarrassing position. Particularly so when we were invited to attend parties hosted by them, to which we could not say no and where serving drinks was the order of the day. The first time I attended such a party, I was quite

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ignorant of the procedures and convention that drinks would be served. I had thought it was a simple affair, and everything would start at the right moment announced earlier, and be over within a specified time, say an hour or two. For my part, I arrived there in time, but others were trickling in leisurely one by one, at their own pace. The chief guest made his appearance last. That was when the real fun started. First drinks, to be sipped slowly with some slight snacks to munch with

them. When the first serving was over, the second, then the third, and so on, which went on for an hour or two, if not more, when all the while an intimate tête-à-tête about nothing in particular was going on. A glass of a cool drink was given to me. I did not know how things would or should proceed. I downed it in one gulp. Then the host, one Colonel Lal, the Commandant of Assam Rifles, in whose premises the party was being held, said with a smiling face: 'Swamiji, if you finish off so quickly, what shall we do? How many glasses could we serve or you consume?' From the next time I was careful. But then and there decided to avoid such invitations in future. But that was easier said than done. I could not keep to my resolution because of various compulsions. The following incident should make it clear why.

The next time I was invited was to the New Year dinner at the workshop of the BRTF (Border Road Task Force), who were so helpful to us throughout (of which later). I was not aware that the dinner would go on till the early hours of the morning, with music and dance to follow the dinner. This time, after attending it, I was more determined than ever to avoid it altogether the next year. The next year, however, came in the twinkling of an eye. Again there was an invitation from Major Rawal Singh, the host, over the phone. I tried to escape quoting various reasons: our school session would be ending; the results had to be announced; the boys would be leaving for home; I would be dead tired; and so on and so forth, and when all these excuses failed, that our vehicle had got into trouble. He was not to be deterred by all these excuses. He said he would be sending his own vehicle, but I must come. Still, I begged to be excused, saying, 'Let us see next year, this time you leave me out.' On 31st morning, Brigadier Hari Singh, the Commandant of 99 Mountain Brigade stationed there, who was to be the chief guest at the BRTF function, was at the school to extend his New Year greetings to me and the other

swamis; also to the staff and the students. While I was chatting with him came Major Rawal Singh again to press me to accept the invitation. Finding Brigadier Hari Singh, his superior in the army hierarchy there, he directed his words to him: 'I am pressing swamiji to come to the night function, but he is not agreeing!' Brigadier Hari Singh immediately said: 'No, no, swamiji, you *should* come. *At least one sober person must be there to keep things in balance!*' After that, what could I say? I had to say yes.

I Drink No Ordinary Wine!

Mr B K Nehru, the then Governor of Assam and Meghalaya and also of Arunachal Pradesh (NEFA, which had an administrative set-up of its own), was one of the foremost, prominent persons who were instrumental in bringing the Ramakrishna Mission on the Arunachal scene, if not *the* foremost and most prominent. The administrative capital of Arunachal was then located in Shillong, the capital of Assam and Meghalaya (Itanagar had not yet come into existence). So we had to frequent Shillong at least once in a year, as our work was very much intertwined with the Governmental machinery because of the circumstances that gave rise to it, as already related. Whenever I went there, I made it a point to call on Mr Nehru to discuss matters regarding Arunachal, particularly *our* work there, and also as a matter of courtesy. On one occasion, I was invited to have lunch with him and Mrs Shobha Nehru, who, though of foreign origin, had become so identified with Indian culture and tradition that she was hardly distinguishable from our womenfolk, except for the colour of the skin. Later on, Mrs Nehru rang me up to ask whether I could make it for dinner, instead of lunch, as two American ladies also were joining them for dinner and it was her great desire that I should meet them. I readily agreed. Their limousine came to pick me up, and I was at their place at 8 pm sharp. There was an early candle-light dinner, with only

some two- or three-inch thick candles burning bright and illuminating the place, their mild, mellow glow giving a solemn look to the surroundings. Dinner over quickly without much ado, we retired to the huge lounge, and settled down to an after-dinner talk in a relaxed mood. There was a huge jar of alcohol on the mantelpiece, from which Mr Nehru poured one glass for himself and offered another to me. I said, 'No thanks.' 'Why not, Swamiji? The Vedic seers used to drink *soma*, the drink of drinks!' I quoted in reply a Bengali song Sri Ramakrishna was very fond of, which in translation reads like this:

I drink no ordinary wine,
but Wine of Everlasting Bliss,
As I repeat my Mother Kali's name;
It so intoxicates my mind that
 people take me to be drunk!
First my guru gives molasses
 for the making of the Wine;
My longing is the ferment to transform it.
Knowledge, the maker of the Wine,
 prepares it for me then;
And when it is done, my mind imbibes it
 from the bottle of the mantra,
Taking the Mother's name to make it pure.
Drink of this Wine, says Ramprasad,
 and the four fruits of life are yours.³

And I rounded off my reply with the words: 'So, you see, I don't need your ordinary wine.' He just smiled, and we fell to talking about more serious things.

The talk slowly drifted to one Swami Aghananda Sarasvati, a renegade monk, German or Austrian by birth, who for some time had acted as an aide-de-camp to Subhas Chandra Bose in Germany before he thought of taking to ochre robes; spent some years at our Ashrama at Mayavati; then left and worked for some time at Banaras Hindu University; had his misadventures there; and was deported. He finally settled in America. A voracious reader, and eater, too, he had his bright and dark sides, as everyone has. I told Mr Nehru all that I knew about him, and then

the talk of renunciation, sannyasa, the monastic ideal, cropped up, and we talked about its pros and cons in detail. Then, suddenly, he said abruptly, more in fun than seriously: 'Swamiji, I also often think: why not I renounce everything and become a monk? What do you think?' He was obviously having a dig at Mrs Nehru when he said 'everything', referring to her by the term. She was quick to catch the drift of his words and retorted with appropriate riposte: 'Yes, yes, you can give me up, but *that thing* in your hand, that you will never be able to give up.' And we all had a good laugh.

The Need to Befriend One and All

On another occasion, a new commandant had taken charge of the BRTF, Colonel Patwardhan by name. He was taken aback seeing me, a monk, at the party. He was greatly puzzled why, of all persons, I was there. Finding a suitable opportunity, he drew me aside and questioned me about it. Then I explained to him in detail the whys and wherefores of it. The work we were engaged in needed our befriending one and all—the tribals on the one side and the government officials on the other, right from the topmost official down to the ordinary menial. It was important to keep everyone in good humour, however irksome, irritating or inconvenient. For you would not know whose help you would need and when in that difficult terrain. These parties provided the opportunity to mix with one and all freely and keep in contact with one another, however galling and wearisome it might be for us monks. We had to put up with this much of discomfort for the sake of a greater good. Our work in the area was supposed to bring about a revolution in the life of the local people. It was expected to usher in a new era of peace and prosperity there. He understood. In this connection I narrated to him how his own organization (BRTF and GREF) had been of invaluable assistance to us in our work. In his predecessors' time their guesthouse at

Likabali (from where the climb started for Along, 90 miles away) was always available to us in our travel from Along to and fro. Their workshops in both the places were at our service any time of the day or night. It is the BRTF people who had reconstructed overnight the bamboo structures housing the boys in our hostel that were burnt because of a short circuit. This electrical connection itself they had gone out of their way to fix up, bypassing the usual, tardy bureaucratic procedures. Again, it is they who had arranged for the feeding of the boys from their kitchen in the meanwhile. They had rescued us on innumerable occasions when we were stranded on the roads because of various causes. As, for example, on



The hostel building with its kitchen and dormitories

the very first day of my arrival, when the road to Along was blocked by a big landslide. The consequent slush that covered up the road because of incessant rain had made the movement of vehicles difficult. It was their men who had cleared it up in no time.

And there were two occasions when I was stuck up on the way for six days continuously. The first time was when I was returning from Delhi, where I had gone on some urgent work. I arrived in Dibrugarh by plane without my luggage, which had by mistake been loaded onto another plane. The Brahmaputra

was in full spate. I was stranded there for six days with only one set of clothes, and it was only with the help of the BRTF people that I could cross over and reach Along safely. On the second occasion, I had gone to Jorhat to meet the swami whom I succeeded, and whom I had invited to Along to see the fruition of the work for which he had worked so hard. He was to land there, but did not. I waited for two days, and then decided to return to Along. I went to the BRTF guest house at Likabali on the way, where a phone message was waiting for me from the swami saying that he would be arriving from Dibrugarh the next day by boat at Sonarighat, 30 kilometres away. I went to Sonarighat the next day but he did not turn up. On my return to the guest house there was another call from the swami saying that he had already reached Along by a military sortie. It was evening. Now that he had already reached Along, I decided to proceed straightaway to Along, frustrated after a fruitless six-day hunt for the swami. I just thought of informing the BRTF office. While I was climbing up, our jeep caught fire. Luckily the jawans of the BRTF were there nearby playing volleyball. Immediately they rushed in and doused the fire. Naturally I had to stay back at the BRTF guest house for the night. The next day they repaired the vehicle, and I left for Along. If the previous evening I had proceeded further and the jeep had caught fire, what would have been my fate? I had a miraculous escape indeed. But for the help of the BRTF people this would have been impossible.

Colonel Patwardhan was amazed and wonderstruck to hear all this. Unbelievable, a

story taken out of a novel! That was his feeling or reaction. However, he then asked me what he should do: should he invite me to his parties or not? I told him to follow his predecessor—to invite me only to a private, quiet evening tea or dinner, not to the parties. He did this, but could not avoid prevailing upon me to be present at his parties too. Others were doing this, and he would be a black sheep if he did not follow suit. At a subsequent party thrown by the civil administration in honour of the visiting Governor, he was observing me keenly from a distance, what I was taking and what not, and what I was doing. Then he quietly came to me and asked: 'How are you enjoying, Swamiji?' I replied: 'What is there for me to enjoy here? The atmosphere here is suffocating. I come to give joy to others, not to enjoy myself.'

Tribal Feasts and Festivals

The most trying of such experiences was when we had to attend the feasts and festivals of the tribals either in Along or outside in the villages. As soon as we entered a village, the womenfolk, in their most attractive attire, would just rush to greet us with great enthusiasm, and take us to the place of merriment, full of joy and affection, holding our hands, one on each side, and on reaching the spot we had to dance with them, going round and round in a circle, the so-called *ponung* dance, to the tune and rhythm of their folk songs. If Mr Boken Ete was there, we would be saved. He would somehow persuade them to leave us to ourselves, and they always heeded his words. Otherwise, woe betide us! We had to comply with their wishes, willy-nilly, and we did so gracefully. We had gone there to *serve* them, and we could not afford to offend their sentiments and ignore their expressions of love and affection, however distasteful they were to us.

Then, there were the two most important festivals of theirs in the year, *Mopin* and *Solung*, when we would be smeared with rice powder mixed with *apong*, their home-made

brew, just like coloured powder during our Holi. Awfully smelling to our unaccustomed noses! But we had to put up with it for hours in honour of their custom. And we did it willingly, committed as we were to their service, welfare, and uplift.

Then the witnessing of the sacrifice of animals, specially their most sacred *mithun*, huge in size and similar in look to buffaloes, however painful it was to our sensibilities. It was *their* faith and belief that the gods would be pleased with this sacred act, and it would be going against the grain of our philosophy trying to forcibly stop the practice prevalent from time immemorial. Had not our own Krishna declared in the *Bhagavadgita*: 'The wise man should not unsettle the faith of the ignorant who are devoted to their own form of worship (literally, attached to work). He should stabilize their faith by his own example and take them slowly to higher forms of worship.'⁴

And we followed Krishna's words implicitly. Once a foetus was found inside an animal after it was strangled to death, as is the way of sacrifice adopted by the Minyong tribe, and another time the man appointed for the purpose was a raw hand, belonging to the younger generation and could not, as is the practice with the other tribe, Gallongs, land the axe properly and with the force needed, with the result that the animal escaped with the axe having pierced only half through its neck. Heartrending as both these sights were, I braved the ordeal with as smiling a face as possible, with determination, trusting to Krishna's above dictate.

Encomiums Showered on Our Work

With so much attention paid to us we were naturally elated. Who wouldn't be? Such adoration, such unheard of accolades and words of praise and appreciation streaming in a continuous flow! Encomiums showered on us unabated! Tributes galore! And paens sung in our honour! The cynosure of all eyes! It is really a wonder that we did not go mad,

puffed up with pride and jubilant as we were. After all, what we had achieved or done till then was just a speck compared to what was yet to come. However, a few of these encouraging pats on the back we received I may as well share with the readers, for they make for interesting reading.

For the dignitaries who came on some errand or other to Along, a visit to our school was a *must*. Otherwise, most of them would consider their coming to Along incomplete and devoid of any true worth and content. So they would somehow try to squeeze in some time out of their busy schedule to pay at least a flying visit to our institution. More often than not, it would be in the evenings, the attraction

We always had pride of place at all the functions organized and dinner parties thrown, either by the civil administration or the military. The idea was that the tribals would automatically be convinced that we are somebody worthy of regard and veneration when the officers, whom the tribals addressed as nigams, and looked upon with awe and respect, honoured us.

being the evening prayers by the hostel boys in Hindi, Sanskrit and Bengali, besides their own mother tongue *Adi*. On one such occasion, a Sikh top brass of the army had come. After the fifteen-minute prayer session, he exclaimed, exulting in surprise: 'Swamiji, how could you sit motionless that long with eyes shut, or how could the boys themselves, to whom it must be a new, strange experience, be sitting like statues, with only their lips moving in prayer? I was feeling so restless and out of sorts.' What could I say in reply? I just smiled and said: 'You are wondering at our action! On the other hand, we are always wondering how you people in the army face the bullets without winking your eyes a bit, without a

murmur and without a trace of fear, dreadful as the sound of guns in the battlefields is for all of us. How do you do it? Everything is a question of practice, don't you think so?' Each is great in his own place, as Swami Vivekananda said.

Another notable figure who graced the institution by calling on us was one General Krishnan (or was he a Brigadier?). Again it was prayer time. He told us later what was passing through his mind as he sat there silently, meditating. He hailed from South India. A brahmin by birth, he had been brought up in its hoary tradition of worship and meditation right from his childhood, but had practically lost contact with it as he grew up, especially after joining the army. In his ancestral home he had seen a photo of Sri Ramakrishna hanging on the wall. He had never felt the necessity or curiosity to know anything about him. There were, as is usual in every Hindu household of yore, pictures of many saints and sages, besides of gods and goddesses, and he had taken it for granted that this was also of one such common brood of saints and sages. But, now, as

he was listening intently to the prayers with undivided attention, and was looking at the life-size photo of Sri Ramakrishna in the prayer hall with a fixed gaze, his childhood memories revived, and he kept on wondering: 'Is it not the same person whose photo adorned the wall of my house, which I had been seeing ever since my boyhood, and yet had never cared to even inquire who he was. But now look at this miracle! These tribal boys, whose ancestors were till recently living in primitive conditions, and perhaps many of their kith and kin even now do, singing songs so melodiously in Sanskrit, Hindi and Bengali, and chanting the Vedic hymns with such clear accent and pronunciation, which may put to

shame any modern brahmin from South India! And their manners and behaviour worthy of emulation by anybody! So perfect and polite! Who are they, living in this remote corner of India? And who is Ramakrishna born in far-off Kamarpukur? What connection between the two? Yet, is He not the one who has brought about this transformation? Hail to Thee, Ramakrishna, the Embodiment of Love and Perfection! Mercy and Kindness Incarnate! The Saviour of the Fallen and Downtrodden!

Next day, I again met him at the party hosted by the 55 Mountain Brigade stationed there. Of course, as had become the practice, I was made to sit beside him, the chief guest of the evening. A barbecue meal was in readiness. He was closely observing me, with a glass of a cool drink in my hand and a plate filled with only vegetarian dishes, and then opened out his heart to me: 'I am really wonderstruck at the liberality and broad outlook of you Ramakrishna monks. Two or three days before I was there at your centre in Narottam Nagar. The swami offered me eggs and some egg preparations. I was astonished. I couldn't believe my eyes. The swami assured me that he himself did not touch them. But these boys are accustomed to taking meat and such things from their very birth, and according to Swami Vivekananda's directive and injunction, he did not have the least hesitation to serve them these and whatever else they are used to from their very birth. His breadth of vision really carried me off my feet. And here it has literally taken my breath away to see you in our midst. It must surely be the most compromising situation to you, the atmosphere the most unholy and the surroundings most unhealthy and yet you are sitting here without batting an eyelid! No supercilious look, nor disdainful demeanour! No holier-than-thou attitude either! This is what I like most about the Ramakrishna people: their universal outlook, their broadmindedness and bigness of heart, and whose spirit of equality and egali-

tarianism I have seen at their best in these two institutions.'

But the best comments on our work were those by Mrs Shobha Nehru and the wife of that tribal leader of Pasighat, the most venerated Botuk Mayung. Mrs Nehru had come to inaugurate the new wing of our school. What she said in a spontaneous outburst after going round the institution and witnessing the various programmes put up by our boys and girls was sweet music to our ears. 'Your school, Swamiji,' she said, 'can compare with any public school in the country.' 'Only see that a wastepaper basket is kept ready at hand', she added, seeing none when she wanted to throw something.

Mrs Mayung had come with her husband to attend a *kebang*, a large gathering of tribals from all parts of Arunachal Pradesh, to discuss and decide on some important matter of concern to them. Both of them paid a visit to the school also, and had tea and snacks with us. When once I had to visit Pasighat subsequently, I paid a return courtesy visit on them. While we were having snacks and tea with them, I saw her whispering something to our Deputy Commissioner, who was with me then, in her own *Adi* language, as she knew no other. I asked the Commissioner what she was talking about. I was really taken aback by what she had said. 'She says, Swamiji,' he said, 'that she is wondering how swamiji is sitting in this "dirty" humble cottage of theirs. "Swamiji's quarters and the whole surroundings of the school and hostel, I saw when we had been to Along, were so spick and span so holy and pure, that I was afraid to step on them with my dirty feet."' I was astounded by her remarks, but I still cherish them the most in my heart. What better reward can there be for all the efforts we put in to build up the institution and improve the condition of the people? It flatters my ego even now, after more than three decades, whenever I recall her words and think of this ingenuous response of hers for what little we did or had done for her

people.

No, no, please wait, that is not the end of the story, the last word on the subject! Hear this, and you will realize for yourself. One evening a boy, named Bomi Lingi, hardly four or five, arrived with his father at the portals of our hostel. They had travelled some three hundred or four hundred miles, the father told us, at the insistence of the boy. The boy had heard from someone that there was a school run by the Ramakrishna Mission, where boys and girls were getting good education, and he was eager to join it. He would not let go his father until he took him there. I was wonderstruck and dumbfounded. We had no alternative but to ask the father to leave the boy in the hostel. I was reminded of a Bengali song on Ramakrishna by Swami Abhedananda, in which the following line occurs: 'Na dekhe nam sune kane man giye lipto holo. O Mother, what a marvel it is! I have not seen Thee, but have only heard about Thee. But by merely hearing about Thee, my mind is auto-

We had to comply with their wishes, willy-nilly, and we did so gracefully. We had gone there to serve them, and we could not afford to offend their sentiments and ignore their expressions of love, however distasteful they were to us.

matically drawn to Thee and has become completely absorbed in Thee!' And there is another Sanskrit hymn to Sri Ramakrishna composed by the same swami: 'Śrutiā tu te nāma bhavanti bhaktāḥ/ Drṣṭvā vayam na tu bhaktiyuktāḥ. We have seen you day in and day out, we have been in contact with you day and night, yet have not developed true devotion to you in earnest. But these people are thronging to you in hundreds with utmost devotion by merely hearing about you! How wonderful and amazing!'

The case of this boy, was it not something

similar? He simply heard about the Ramakrishna Mission School and wanted to join it, just an urchin though he was! I used to call him Atmaram, 'Self-satisfied', because the evening he came all the boys had gone to see a picture in the town, and none of us swamis knew his language. So he had to fend for himself after the father had left. That did not bother him at all. He engaged himself in some game of his own innovation until the other boys returned. His eagerness to be in our school was so great. 'Was this not a bright feather in our cap?' I thought. Within a few days he was a different personality, of which later.

Brickbats Hurled

This is not to say that everything was smooth sailing—all honey and butter, a bed of roses always. There were brickbats too; trials and tribulations in plenty to try our patience to the utmost. Funds were hard to come by. Early promises and the interest and enthusiasm of the men at the top notwithstanding, the hands

of the government, for reasons of its own, were tied in releasing the needed funds freely and when necessary. Food was frugal, with not even milk to spare in sufficient quantity. No electricity, no toilet facility, living conditions barely minimum, Dibrugarh a hundred miles away, across the turbulent Brahmaputra (a boat ride of

three hours for a ten- minute straight drive, if it were possible), being the nearest station to get our essentials like furniture. There were many other constraints, purely social and cultural, not to say religious, that obtained in the social and religious milieu we had to work in. There were anxious moments when officers, both civil and military, changed. We had a harrowing time if they happened to be hostile to us. Not fully acquainted with the background of our work, they were often very unsympathetic to us. And there was still a section

of the tribals inclined to Christian missionaries who were not reconciled to our being there. However much the administration and we assured them that our interest was the education of their children, as Swami Vivekananda himself had commanded us,⁵ and that Hinduism was not at all an evangelizing religion, they were not fully convinced. There was always a lurking suspicion in their minds that we were there to convert subtly. They were trying to put hurdles on our way.

To mention one incident, there was once a big *kebang*, the meeting of the elders of their society, apparently to discuss some urgent matters affecting them, but mainly to discuss the question, the real motive behind our work there. A tribal officer of the administration brought the earlier mentioned Batuk Mayung and his wife to our school to see things for themselves. I could easily guess his intention: to show them our shrine and to convince them that we were there to proselytize. Of course, in our shrine was a picture of Jesus Christ too, along with those of Sri Ramakrishna and the founders of three other major religions: Buddhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism. No symbol being permissible to represent Mohammedanism, there was none. As I was having tea with them in our lounge, a thought flitted across my mind: they would surely like to see our shrine, which was gorgeous, a star attraction of the place, and if I asked them to remove their shoes before entering, the said gentleman would immediately make an issue of it, if not raise a hue and cry, and tell Mr Batuk: 'See, I told you they are propagating Hindu customs and manners', though in theory at least no Hindu scripture,

as far as my knowledge goes, proscribes taking shoes inside a shrine. It is only the Bible which specifically prohibits it: 'Put off thy shoes from thy feet: for the place where thou standest is holy ground.'⁶ Anyway, I had decided within myself that I would not object to their taking the shoes within if they chose to do so. But, strange to say, the gentleman himself, as also the other two, removed their shoes themselves before entering the shrine. I was saved from an embarrassing situation.

But the said officer would not leave things at that. He admitted his boy in our school and hostel and then went on complaining every now and then about trivial things.



The author speaking on the occasion of the school's inauguration

For example, his son had scabies once. That was enough for him to kick up a row. I told him: 'You see, I cannot promise or guarantee that the children will not get scabies or otherwise not fall sick. But you ask your boy whether his scabies had been attended to or not, whether he had been taken to the doctor or not, and whether the prescribed medicines had been given to him or not.' The boy said all these had been done. That would not satisfy him, however. He still continued objecting to this or that. Finally I told him: 'We have come here only to serve you, and will do whatever

you think is best for your children. But, before we do that, you stay here for a few days with us, and then, after closely observing everything tell us if anything is wrong with what we are doing in the children's interests.' That silenced him. Of course, he knew everything was going fine, but was objecting only for objection's sake.

Such pinpricks were innocuous and harmless in themselves, flimsy as they were. But when they came from officers, even junior ones, whether of the civil administration or the military, they were of much nuisance and great hindrance to the smooth working of the institution, and in carrying on the normal

'Swamiji's quarters and the whole surroundings of the school and hostel, I saw when we had been to Along, were so spick and span so holy and pure, that I was afraid to step on them with my dirty feet.' I was astounded by her remarks, but I still cherish them the most in my heart. What better reward can there be for all the efforts we put in to build up the institution and improve the condition of the people?

day-to-day activity quietly without a hitch. If they were to be from the Deputy Commissioner, who was the monarch of the district, or the Governor and his advisor, who were the supreme authorities in the administration, matters did really come to a head and made things difficult to manage. And we had many such occasions. Mostly when their objectives and ways of working were not in consonance, if not directly in conflict, with the ideals of the Mission or the monastic ideal. And we had had the mortification of facing trumped-up charges of negligence of our duties towards the children and the public; or false accusations of moral decrepitude and not keeping up

the decorum of office or social behaviour; or carping criticism at every step; worst of all, character assassination.

Swamiji Was Our Real Strength

But we could brave all this because there were these encouraging words of Swami Vivekananda, 'There are people who are ready to pick holes in everything.' (6.356) '... I never saw a man who could satisfy everyone.' (8.471) '... Be brave and face everything—come good, come evil, both welcome, both of you my play. ... If the universe tumbles round my ears, what is that to me? I am Peace that passeth understanding.' (8.505) And there was

his own personal example to sustain us throughout. Had he not himself faced situations a million times more challenging and difficult, and character assassination of the worst sort, than what we were ever confronted with; and that, too, in a foreign country like America, which was not the same a hundred years back as it is today and was specially hostile to foreigners, particularly religious preachers? 'Fifty years ago,' Ingersoll, the famous atheist, had indeed warned him, 'you would have been hanged in this

country if you had come to preach, or you would have been stoned out of the villages.'⁷ His words of anguish in this connection were: 'I am sorry for poor Mazoomdar that he should stoop so low!! He says that I am leading a bestially unchaste life with American women!! Lord bless the old boy—women of America know better of me I hope.' (2.84) And then again: 'Now I do not care what they even of my own people say about me—except for one thing. I have an old mother. She has suffered much all her life and in the midst of all she could bear to give me up for the service of God and man—but to have given up the most

beloved of her children—her hope—to live a beastly immoral life in a far distant country—as Mazoomdar was telling in Calcutta would have simply killed her.' (2.85) 'The great Hindi poet Tulasidas in the benediction to his translation of the Ramayan says "I bow down to both the wicked and the holy, but alas for me they are both equally torturers—the wicked begin to torture me as soon as they come in contact with me—the good alas take my life away when the *leave* me." I say amen to this. ... But these things must come—thou music of my beloved's flute—lead on, I am following.' (2.102-3) 'Every ounce of fame can only be bought at the cost of a pound of peace and holiness.' (2.106) And then these comforting words: "'All noble undertakings are fraught with obstacles.' It is quite in the nature of things. Keep up the deepest mental poise. Take not even the slightest notice of what puerile creatures may be saying against you. Indifference, indifference, indifference!' (2.118) 'Glory unto Jagadamba [Mother of the Universe]—I have gained beyond expectations—the prophet has been honoured and with a *vengeance*. I am weeping like a child at His mercy—He never leaves his servant, sisters' (2.116) 'But the Lord is great, none can injure His children.'⁸ 'Some would call you a saint, some a *candala*: some a lunatic, others a demon. Go on then straight to thy work without heeding either.'⁹

With these sterling words ringing in our

ears, we applied ourselves to the task at hand with renewed vigour, not looking this side or that, notwithstanding innumerable obstacles on the way. Every tree that stands there today, to save which we had to spend sleepless nights, is a living witness to the drops of blood shed for the cause by everyone.

(*to be continued*)

References

1. See Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, 6 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1992), vol. 1, *His Prophetic Mission*, 35. See also *Prabuddha Bharata*, May 1955, 210.
2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.297.
3. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985), 95.
4. *Na buddhibhedāñ janayed-
ajñānāñ karmasaṅginām;
Joṣayet sarvakarmāṇi
vidvān yuktaḥ samācaran.*
—*Bhagavadgita*, 3.26.
5. 'Our work should be mainly *educational*, both moral and intellectual.' —CW, 7.208.
6. Acts, 7.33.
7. See *New Discoveries*, vols. 1 and 2.
8. CW, 7.462.
9. ibid., 7.468.

A young business executive phoned his foreign representative one day and tersely announced: 'I am calling to give instructions. This call will last no more than three minutes. I shall speak and you are not to interrupt. Any comments or queries you have are to be cabled to me later.'

With that he went on to deliver his message. His delivery was so rapid that he finished a little ahead of time. 'We have twenty seconds left,' he told the man at the other end. 'Have you anything to say?'

'Yes,' came the reply. 'You spoke so fast I couldn't understand a word.'

Personal Development versus Social Well-being

SWAMI BRAHMESHANANDA

Which is more important: social welfare or personal development, uplift of society or attainment of personal goals, social interest or self-interest, the benefit of society or personal interest? This is a perennial question. Throughout human history and in every country, there have been advocates of both the views.

Different Views on the Subject

Protagonists of self-development or individual welfare over social uplift argue that society is after all an aggregate of individuals, and it can only advance to the extent its individual members improve. That society is

Besides, since an individual lives in society, he is constantly subject to the influence of social forces, which, if favourable, conduce to his development. No individual progress is possible in a disharmonious or backward society. Seeking personal gains is selfishness, and no individual must be allowed to pursue them at the cost of society. Society must exert sufficient control over the individual.

While the individualists insist that the individual must be allowed fullest personal freedom to pursue his own personal aims, goals and targets, the socialists on the other hand believe that social goals must be given priority over individual gains.

One is inclined to believe that brahmanas were more prone to seeking moksha; kshatriyas, or the warrior class, dharma; vaishyas, or the trader class, artha, or wealth; and shudras or the labour class, kama, the fulfilment of material, worldly, sensual desires.

better which contains a larger number of individuals with great achievements and noble character. So more stress must be laid on individual development for society to flourish as a whole, because the very purpose of social organization is the betterment of the individual.

Advocates of the opposite view—that society is more important than the individual—have their own arguments. They say that man is a social animal, and as long as he does not actively involve himself in social welfare, he cannot even obtain personal happiness. Such a person gets alienated and becomes abnormal.

liberty but little scope to express and pursue one's religious preferences.

The Four Castes and the Four Values

In Hinduism the problem of social versus individual benefits was resolved in a unique way. For individuals, Hindu sages set four goals or aims to pursue, which they called the four purusharthas: dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kama (desire) and moksha (liberation). Again, they divided society into four castes (varnas) and four stations of life (ashramas), clearly delineating the duties and

responsibilities of each. This is called varnashrama dharma. Each one was supposed to follow his or her specified code of righteous conduct, and through it gain wealth, fulfilment of desires and even final freedom, or spiritual emancipation. And this code was to be followed quite rigidly. While dharma, or social code of conduct, was the main purushartha, or the goal aspired after, for the members of all castes, one is inclined to believe that brahmanas were more prone to seeking moksha; kshatriyas, or the warrior class, dharma; vaishyas, or the trader class, artha, or wealth; and shudras or the labour class, kama, the fulfilment of material, worldly, sensual desires. Rama and Krishna were kshatriyas; so were the five Pandavas. Their life and exploits are described in detail in the two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which are the greatest dharma-shastras of the Hindus. The brahmanas were supposed to be the most cultured, while the shudras, the least. Hence the above general observation that the four castes followed the four purusharthas.

The Pursuit of Dharma

But what about the conflict between individual dharma and social dharma? There are enough examples of this conflict and their possible answers in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. In the *Ramayana*, for example, Dasharatha observes his personal dharma—of granting the two boons he had promised to Kaikeyi—but it was detrimental to social welfare, and injustice was meted out to Rama. Rama and Bharata, however, acted so wisely that they were not only able to make the best use of the two boons for the good of society, but also fulfilled their personal dharma.

Let us take an example from the *Mahabharata*. Considered one of the most righteous personalities, Bhishma decided to fight on the

side of the Kauravas, who were basically unrighteous. When asked about the validity of his act, he said that dharma was always personal. A hint of a similar attitude is found also in the *Bhagavadgita*. Sri Krishna virtually goads Arjuna to fight, totally disregarding the evil social consequences of war. Arjuna describes in the first chapter of the book. Instead, Arjuna was asked to set an example of strictly following his own svadharma—personal

The very concept of yajna is sociological. You must give back what you have received—nay, much more than that—and not only to the person from whom you have received, but to all beings—divine, human and subhuman—who may not have done any direct service to you.

code of righteousness—for people to emulate. A similar hint is found also in the *Katha Upanishad*, wherein Nachiketa advises his father to follow the examples of ancient people and set an example for posterity. Indeed, one feels that the stress in the Hindu scriptures is entirely on the observance of individual dharma and the social gains that accrue from it.

The Pursuit of Artha and Kama

What about the pursuit of artha—acquisition of wealth as the goal of personal endeavour? Although theoretically one can earn wealth without greed, in practice it appears impossible. One may also argue that trade and industry, which generate wealth, also indirectly benefit society. In ancient times there were merchants called *shreshthis*, who did a lot for society as well, like building rest houses, sinking wells and digging ponds. However, with the modern exploitative commercialization of the whole society, it is almost certain that the pursuit of wealth as a personal aim cannot conduce to the welfare of society.

Nor can seeking fulfilment of one's desires, kama, conduce to social welfare. But there is a bright side to this too. Swami Vivekananda was of the opinion that a certain amount of luxury in society would generate employment for the masses.

Social Commandments

Before taking up for discussion the fourth and final purushartha, moksha, and its social implications, let us study briefly the social commandments of the Hindus. It has al-

A mere observance of personal purity, contentment, leading an austere life, studying the scriptures and self-surrender will be of no avail if the virtues under yama are not cultivated. On the contrary, no harm will befall a person if he strictly follows the five yamas, even if he does not observe in toto the five niyamas.

ready been mentioned that the division of society into four varnas was mainly a social one, essentially based on duties and responsibilities, and not on rights and privileges. A brahmana's duty was to promote learning and carry out priestly duties. A kshatriya was expected to rule, defend the country and implement law and order. A vaishya was supposed to engage in trade and commerce, agriculture and animal husbandry. And it was the duty of a shudra to serve others and to do works requiring physical labour, including menial work.

There were also other injunctions called *ishta* and *purta* karmas, which, too, were primarily social in nature—meant to pay back the debt one owes to the supreme Spirit, the gods, the ancestors and humanity at large, and even subhuman creatures. One must attend to guests and take care of domestic cattle, pets

and even birds and insects! These were called the five yajnas, sacrifices. The very concept of yajna is sociological. You must give back what you have received—nay, much more than that—and not only to the person from whom you have received, but to all beings—divine, human and subhuman—who may not have done any direct service to you. You are a part of a cosmic, composite whole made up of human beings, animals, birds, insects, plants, trees and forests—in fact, the whole of nature. You have to contribute to the well-being of this whole, for the well-being of the unit depends on the health and well-being of the whole. This is the idea behind the concept of yajna.

Purta karmas include building of temples, rest houses, digging of ponds, and the like. A person with resources or wealth inadequate for such undertakings was expected to contribute his mite to such projects.

Patanjali's Yama and Niyama

Patanjali's system of yoga has eight steps. The first two, *yama* and *niyama*, consist of five moral virtues each. The five *yamas* are the universal ethical codes: non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity and non-covetousness. The five *niyamas* are purity, contentment, austerity, study of the scriptures and a spirit of self-surrender to God. It will be noticed that while the five *niyamas* are essentially personal values, the five *yamas* are basically social in their implications. Violence or non-violence is meaningless in the absence of another being; truthfulness relates to someone who testifies to it; stealing or non-stealing is concerned with another's possession; chastity or sex indulgence also depends upon two individuals; non-covetousness also means giving up all desire to possess more than what one really needs, thus not depriving others who have

less than what they need. It is significant to note that far greater emphasis has been laid upon the observance of *yama* than *niyama*. A mere observance of personal purity, contentment, leading an austere life, studying the scriptures and self-surrender will be of no avail if the virtues under *yama* are not cultivated. On the contrary, no harm will befall a person if he strictly follows the five *yamas*, even if he does not observe in toto the five *niyamas*. Indeed, the sincere, selfless fulfilment of a social commitment is a far greater discipline than the practice of austerities or individual study of the scriptures.

The Pursuit of Moksha, the Ultimate Value

Let us now take up the all-important question of the social implications of the pursuit of moksha, or spiritual liberation. In Sanskrit the pursuit of moksha is called *nivritti* and that of all other values, including even social welfare, *pravritti*. These two—*pravritti* and *nivritti*—are thought contrary to each other. One enters the path of *nivritti* only after one has achieved the goal of *pravritti* or is disillusioned by it. Typically, such a sincere aspirant after moksha withdraws from the world, takes to monastic life and leads a contemplative life in solitude. He is virtually dead to the world and cannot apparently have any useful function for society. That is the reason why such seekers after moksha have been dubbed good-for-nothing escapists.

Seekers of salvation, too, consider the world and its botherations a serious distraction. In the words of Swami Vivekananda, they view the world as 'a dirty hole' from which one must get out as quickly as possible. To attempt to improve society, they believe, is as futile as to try to straighten a dog's curly tail. They have enough support for this in the

teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, who on a number of occasions dissuaded spiritual aspirants from taking up philanthropic activities like starting schools and hospitals. Swami Vivekananda himself had to face stiff resistance from his own brother disciples when he wanted to start relief works and such other welfare activities.

Contrary to this attitude are Swami Vivekananda's teachings. He was of the firm opinion—and this he had learnt from none other than Sri Ramakrishna himself—that service to man, looking upon him as God, is the best form of spiritual practice. It expands the heart, purifies the mind and trains the intellect. To one of his disciples who wanted to devote his time exclusively to meditation, Swami Vivekananda had warned: 'You will go to hell if you try for your personal salvation.' Elsewhere he said that a time comes when one realizes that one cannot have personal emancipation without the liberation of others, and

A spiritual aspirant seeking personal salvation begins as a self-centred individual. But real spiritual unfoldment makes him spontaneously more and more cosmo-centric. His consciousness gradually expands until he finally realizes his identity with the whole universe.

that preparing a chillum (a pipe for smoking tobacco) for others is as noble an act as meditation. To try to go ahead of others for salvation is a wrong attitude, he said.

A spiritual aspirant seeking personal salvation begins as a self-centred individual. But real spiritual unfoldment makes him spontaneously more and more cosmo-centric. His consciousness gradually expands until he finally realizes his identity with the whole universe. Then he cannot but engage in the welfare of the whole world.

No one can be a mystic without passing through rigorous self-discipline. This in itself is a tremendous gain for society. The seeker after Self-realization invariably sets in motion or gets associated with some socio-spiritual movement or other, which in the long run effects great good to society. A true mystic becomes a force for social change. He inspires people to be more unselfish and lead restrained lives. He spreads love and goodwill among people, and thus indirectly brings about social cohesion.

Self-improvement and Social Welfare Are Not Contradictory

Let us conclude with two little tales that try to reconcile social welfare and personal development. The first one relates to Swami Premananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and brother disciple of Swami Vivekananda. He was one of those few disciples who in the beginning did not approve of the welfare activities introduced by Swami Vivekananda. According to him, meditation, prayer, scriptural study, ritualistic worship—in short, activities directly connected with the temple—were sacred or spiritual, whereas those pertaining to the world of men, like helping the helpless and feeding the hungry, though good, were nonetheless secular. So he would often advise monastics to return to Belur Math as soon as possible on completion of their wel-

fare projects, so that they spent the least time in the outside world doing secular works. But once he fell ill and went to the Varanasi Home of Service for treatment and to recoup his health. There he went through some of the volumes of the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* that had just been published. And a veil of misunderstanding, as it were, fell from his mind. He realized that Swamiji never spoke of service to 'man'. To him man was God. And indeed he always insisted on serving not man, but the divinity latent in him. In that case, there remains nothing secular. Every act becomes sacred. Nursing the sick and feeding the hungry then become acts no less sacred than meditation on God—nay, even superior.

The second is a Buddhist story. A juggler had a disciple and the two used to perform together, one balancing the other. Instructing the disciple, the juggler once said that during the performance the disciple must pay attention to him, the master, so that he may not fall down and get hurt. The disciple, however, disagreed and said that if each fully concentrated on his own performance, that would assure the safety of both.

Indeed, rightly done, there cannot be any difference between the sacred and the secular, between self-improvement and social welfare. '*Atmano mokshartham jagaddhitaya cha*, for one's own salvation and for the welfare of the world' is a most comprehensive ideal. *

Happiness

True philosopher that he was, Socrates believed that the wise person would instinctively lead a frugal life. He himself would not even wear shoes; yet he constantly fell under the spell of the marketplace and would go there often to look at all the wares on display.

When one of his friends asked why, Socrates said, 'I love to go there and discover how many things I am perfectly happy without.'

Swami Vivekananda Loved America

ASIM CHAUDHURI

How do I know that? Because the Swami himself said so on many occasions. In May 1896 he wrote to Mary Hale from England: 'But it is to Amerique—there where the heart is. I love the Yankee land. ... In America is the place, the people, the opportunity for everything.'¹ This was not a statement by an awestruck Hindu monk at his initial exposure to the United States; he was expressing this sentiment after spending close to three years in the country. By that time he knew what America was all about. He hit the nail on the head when he mentioned the word 'opportunity'. Frederick Turner (1861-1932), an American historian, once said, 'America has been another name for opportunity.'²

What was so distinctive about America or Americans that they could command such love, admiration and respect from Swami Vivekananda? What made them stand out? Once we know that, we will also know why they were able to civilize a Stone Age wilderness in just four centuries, when Europeans took sixty,³ or what inspired them to build the most productive, wealthy and powerful nation in the world.

For answers, we have to look back at America as Swami Vivekananda saw her. We have to study his personal views and perceptive observations, and try to relate them to the prevailing American beliefs, culture and core values.

Cultural Forces in America

The distinctive traits and institutions of Americans are due in part to their pioneering past. Hammond and Morrison⁴ conducted a

provocative study of the seven macro-cultural forces that fuel the American way of life, and have been driving the American people since the birth of this country. These are the seven forces: insistence on choice, pursuit of impossible dreams, obsession with big and more, impatience with time, acceptance of mistakes, urge to improvise and, finally, fixation with 'whatsnew'.

Now, what is a cultural force? Culture can be thought of as knowledge of music, literature, painting or other arts. But it can also be thought of as emanating from a set of simple, fundamental beliefs. Expressed in the behav-

These are the seven forces: insistence on choice, pursuit of impossible dreams, obsession with big and more, impatience with time, acceptance of mistakes, urge to improvise and, finally, fixation with 'whatsnew'.

hours of the culture's elders, these beliefs can be adopted by successive generations and thus become ingrained as culture. And that was what Hammond and Morrison were referring to.

Swami Vivekananda did not specifically mention these cultural forces by name, but most of what he observed and remarked about America and Americans was the results of these cultural forces in action. As we examine some fundamental American beliefs, we shall see that cultural forces are the vehicles that transform beliefs into action.

Primary Beliefs

Necessity is the mother of invention. It

also moulded the cultural beliefs of the early American settlers, which have prevailed ever since. The early settlers faced extreme hardship, and the first necessity for survival was work—hard work, and plenty of it. So, these were the primary American beliefs: everyone must work, people must benefit from their work, and manual work is respectable.⁵

Take the primary belief 'everyone must work', and work hard. This belief set the wheel in motion for the pursuit of impossible dreams. America's opulence, derived from hard work and cooperative effort, probably impressed Swami Vivekananda the most; he

Take the primary belief 'everyone must work', and work hard. This belief set the wheel in motion for the pursuit of impossible dreams. America's opulence, derived from hard work and cooperative effort, probably impressed Swami Vivekananda the most; he felt the presence of tremendous energy everywhere.

felt the presence of tremendous energy everywhere. The expectation of deriving benefit from work may not follow the tenets of the *Bhagavadgita*, but we are talking about ordinary people, not true karma yogis. But 'work, work, work' was Swami Vivekananda's favourite battle cry. He exemplified the propensity for hard work in his own life, even jeopardizing his own health in the process. He stressed its virtue to the extent of saying that it is almost better to be at work in sin than doing nothing at all. The dignity of labour was also something very near and dear to Swamiji's heart, and he saw it in action in America and loved it.

Fixation with 'Whatsnew'

Every culture is interested to some degree in 'whatsnew', but in America it is an ob-

session.⁶ Time and time again Swami Vivekananda commented on this cultural force. This is the last of the seven forces, and closely related to the others. He said: 'Let anything new come from some foreign country, and America will be the first to accept it.'⁷ 'America is the best field in the world to carry on any idea.' (8.313) 'Many of the men brought together here from far-off lands have got projects and ideas and missions to carry out, and America is the only place where there is a chance of success for everything.' (7.457)

These say it all; America is decidedly the land of 'whatsnew' and perpetual renewal.

The intellectual richness and philosophic profundity of Vedanta provided the American people with a new choice and drew their rapt attention. Swami Vivekananda's success in America was an endorsement of America's strong attachment to this cultural force. His own view in regard to this was this: 'I like to see new things. I do not care a fig to loaf about old ruins and mope a life out about old histories and keep sighing about the ancients. I have too much vigour in my blood for that.' (7.498)

Immigrant Beliefs

A generation is a span of about twenty years. For the first nine generations, from 1610 to 1790, almost every immigrant to the United States was from Europe. Only during the second nine generations (1790-1970) people from other continents immigrated to the US. Regardless of where they came from and when, all these immigrants were acting out three simple beliefs: improvement is possible, opportunities must be imagined, and freedom of movement is needed for success.⁸ These three beliefs can be expressed simply as 'optimistic about finding opportunity wherever it is'.

Swami Vivekananda obviously sub-

scribed to these beliefs himself. Otherwise, why would a mendicant monk from India, without any invitation, sponsor or reference, take the giant step of going to Chicago to represent Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions?

American Dream

Since everyone in America was to some extent an immigrant, except for the native American Indians, these beliefs generated such cultural forces as the pursuit of impossible dreams and an urge to improvise. Although Swami Vivekananda talked about various traits in the American character he admired, he never actually mentioned the phrase 'American dream'. Perhaps the phrase itself was coined in the twentieth century, after his time. But this American dream was the idea that guided the country through the early days of the republic, and is guiding it still. It is one of the most powerful ideas in the history of human achievement. Everyone in this world dreams, but it is in America that your dreams have the best chance of becoming a reality. Why? Because of what Swami Vivekananda mentioned repeatedly: opportunity. Opportunity, combined with hard work, helps people achieve their dreams. The Swami praised the existence of these forces in America when he said, without actually mentioning the word 'dream': 'There are possibilities, opportunities, and hope for every individual in this country. Today he is poor, tomorrow he may become rich and learned and respected.'⁹ 'No man is prohibited [in America] from doing anything he pleases for his livelihood ... and thus thousands are seeking and finding the highest level they were born for.'¹⁰

According to Dan Rather, currently a prominent news commentator in the United

States, historian James Truslow Adams first used this phrase in 1931. For him, the American dream was 'the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement'.¹¹ Adams' comment, made about thirty-five years later, was very much in line with what Swami Vivekananda had observed.

Freedom, the Bedrock of America

No discussion of the American dream is complete without a mention of freedom. Freedom, after all, is America's bedrock. It did not take Swami Vivekananda very long to notice that. At the end of his historic speech on Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions in 1893,

Everyone in this world dreams, but it is in America that your dreams have the best chance of becoming a reality. Why? Because of what Swami Vivekananda mentioned repeatedly: opportunity. Opportunity, combined with hard work, helps people achieve their dreams.

he said: 'Hail Columbia, motherland of liberty! It has been given to thee, who never dipped her hand in her neighbour's blood, who never found out that the shortest way of becoming rich was by robbing one's neighbours, it has been given to thee to march at the vanguard of civilization with the flag of harmony'.¹²

That was his homage to a country whose underlying principles are freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, toleration and secularism.

'Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' are the inalienable right of Americans as mentioned in their Declaration of Independence. Liberty, or freedom, is very near and dear to the hearts of Americans—freedom to

live life as they see fit. But does this mean they have the right to do anything they please? Whether every American realizes it or not, American freedom necessarily contains within it the seeds of discipline and responsibility, and that means respecting others' rights. Swami Vivekananda expressed a similar sentiment:

There cannot be any growth without liberty. Our ancestors freed religious thought, and we have a wonderful religion. But they put a heavy chain on the feet of society, and our society is, in a word, horrid, diabolical. In the West, society always had freedom, and look at them. ...

Liberty is the first condition of growth. Just as man must have liberty to think and speak, so he must have liberty in food, dress, and marriage and in every other thing, so long as he does not injure others. (4.367-8)

Freedom is the only condition of growth;

America's major frontier beliefs were 'progress requires organization', 'each person is responsible for his own well-being', and 'helping others helps yourself'.

take that off, the result is degeneration. (5.23)

'Liberty of thought and action is the only condition of life, of growth, of well-being.' Where it does not exist, the man, the race, the nation must go down.

Caste or no caste, creed or no creed, any man, or class, or caste, or nation, or institution which bars the power of free thought or action of an individual—even so long as the power is not injurious—is devilish, and must go down. (5.29)

The term happiness can be subjective and open to individual interpretation, and Swamiji's concept of it probably would not be the same as that of most Americans. But Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers of America and author of the Declaration of Independence, said: 'It is neither wealth nor splendour, but tranquillity and occupation, which give happiness.'¹³ Swami Vivekananda would have wholeheartedly concurred.

Frontier Beliefs

America's major frontier beliefs were 'progress requires organization', 'each person is responsible for his own well-being', and 'helping others helps yourself'.¹⁴ These beliefs were derived from experience as the early settlers moved west from the east coast and transformed rugged wilderness into farms and towns.

The enthusiasm for forming and belonging to organizations is inherent in the American character. To a society where individuality is highly valued and nurtured, it may seem paradoxical. But the American people learned very early that individual efforts were most effective in organizations. This does not contradict in any way the model of the 'self-made man'.

Americans' working together with a common goal without mutual jealousy was something that attracted Swami Vivekananda's attention. He loved America's predilection for organization; he told Mrs Lyon it was 'the greatest temptation of his life in

America'. He was convinced of its tremendous power. He saw with his own eyes in America how institutions or formal associations of persons magnified individual ability and assured fast and enduring progress.¹⁵ In November 1894 he wrote to Haridas Vihardas Desai from New York: 'The secret of success of the Westerners is the power of organisation and combination. That is only possible with mutual trust and cooperation and help.'¹⁶

Citing the contrasting situation in India Swami Vivekananda said:

Never were there people more wretchedly jealous of one another, more envious of one another's fame and name than this wretched Hindu race. And if you ever come out in the West, the absence of this is the first feeling which you will see in the Western nations.

Three men cannot act in concert together in

India for five minutes. (8.299-300)
He had parallel views regarding the other major frontier beliefs:

My whole ambition in life is to set in motion a machinery which will bring noble ideas to the door of everybody, and then let men and women settle their own fate. (5.29)

Every nation, every man, and every woman must work out their own salvation. Give them ideas—that is the only help they require, then the rest must follow as the effect. (4.362)

The machinery Swami Vivekananda envisioned was in full motion in America, churning out all kinds of ideas, and people took advantage of them to mould their own destiny. The ethic of individual responsibility and the spirit of entrepreneurial free enterprise—two important principles that form the heart of American civilization—are embedded in the above statements.

Swami Vivekananda admired the American spirit of helping others. Americans believe that 'What goes around, comes around.' The person you help today will help someone else tomorrow; so you are likely to receive help from a stranger some day. No nation in this world raises as much money or expends as much effort as America does for any benevolent cause, domestic or international. He saw that in Chicago in 1893.¹⁷ Here are his comments related to this American cultural behaviour: 'Here everyone is anxious to help the poor.'¹⁸ 'If any man tries to move forward here, everybody is ready to help him.'¹⁹

Swami Vivekananda actually reiterated what Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59), a French historian and political philosopher, earlier said in his classic work *Democracy in America*: 'When an American asks for the cooperation of his fellow citizens, it is seldom refused; and I have often seen it afforded spontaneously, and with great goodwill.'²⁰

American Women

Swami Vivekananda repeatedly ap-

plauded the American women for their culture, education, generosity, spirituality and broad-mindedness. In his usual enthusiastic way he said in a letter:

Nowhere in the world are women like those of this country. How pure, independent, self-relying, and kind-hearted! It is the women who are the life and soul of this country. All learning and culture are centred in them.²¹

Their women—they are the most advanced in the world. The average American woman is far more cultivated than the average American man. The men slave all their life for money, and women snatch every opportunity to improve themselves. (5.22)

Probably the best tribute he paid to the American women was in his letter to the Maharaja of Khetri in early 1894, where he said:

American women! A hundred lives would not be sufficient to pay my deep debt of gratitude to you! I have not words enough to express my gratitude to you. 'Oriental hyperbole' alone ex-

Americans' working together with a common goal without mutual jealousy was something that attracted Swami Vivekananda's attention.

presses the depth of Oriental gratitude—'If the Indian Ocean were an inkstand, the highest mountain of the Himalaya the pen, the earth the scroll and time itself the writer, still it will not express my gratitude to you! (6.248)

And this was prior to his meeting Florence Adams, Sara Bull, Betty Leggett, Josephine MacLeod and other women who had helped his mission in innumerable ways. He loved America because of her veneration of women, even before society had allowed them to vote. In his letter from Chicago to Alasinga Perumal, he said, '... Asia laid the germs of civilisation, Europe developed man, and America is developing woman and the masses.' (5.22)

American Technology

Curiosity, persistence and a constant urge to improvise put America in the forefront of science and technology, and the country's wealth is largely derived from that. Swami Vivekananda recognized and praised America's penchant for technological development.

There is a curiosity in this nation, such as you meet with nowhere else. They want to know everything. (5.22)

It is a wonderful country, and this is a wonderful nation in many respects. No other nation applies so much machinery in their everyday work as do the people of this country. Everything is machine. Then again, they are only one-twentieth of the whole population of the world. Yet they have fully one-sixth of all the wealth of the world. (4.361)

The engineering and technology exhibits there impressed him immensely, and his own country's weakness in that area stung him. He wanted America to send to India machinery, instead of missionaries, and wanted to barter Indian spirituality for American technology.

He was introduced to American science and technology immediately after his arrival in Chicago, when he visited the World's Columbian Exposition. The engineering and technology exhibits there impressed him immensely, and his own country's weakness in that area stung him. He wanted America to send to India machinery, instead of missionaries, and wanted to barter Indian spirituality for American technology.

The Other Side

One should not think at this point that American history has always been one long parade of goodness and success. It would take another similar article to cover the downside—the sufferings of the immigrants in New

York tenements and sweatshops, the heart-breaking abuse and exploitation of native and black Americans, the denial of political power to women, savagery and gun violence in the Wild West, the scandals of various city, state and federal administrations, rampant intimidation and extortion by organized crime, a failed foreign policy—the list could go on and on. The American river has run from the high Rockies of lofty thoughts to the Grand Canyon of lowest actions; and I am not talking about the Colorado River. But that is not the subject of this article. What nation is without imperfection? Moreover, to accept one's mistakes and try to fix them is 'as American as apple pie'.

Swamiji being an extremely keen observer of society and the human mind, these dark aspects of the American dream could not have eluded him. As a matter of fact, he made some telling observations about some of them. But he still saw a country with infinite optimism and energy in its bloodstream; he saw a country with a definite 'can do' attitude where people join forces to achieve worthwhile goals. He praised their worldly side: 'Here you

have a wonderful manifestation of grit and power—what strength, what practicality, and what manhood! ... Here is a manifestation of tremendous energy.' (6.272)

'Improvement may be called the psyche of American culture, but the culture's imperative has always been practicality,' says McElroy.²² Swami Vivekananda obviously had noticed that. While giving Americans a high grade on worldly qualities, he recognized their weakness in the spiritual arena when he said, 'As regards spirituality, the Americans are far inferior to us, but their society is far superior to ours. We will teach them our spirituality and assimilate what is best in their society.'²³

That was what exactly he was trying to accomplish in America. He found Americans not wanting in material needs, but starving for spiritual nourishment. He perceived a cause-and-effect relationship between the two, and said: 'It is this tendency to bring everything down to the level of a machine that has given the West its wonderful prosperity. And it is this, which has driven away all religion from its doors. Even the little that is left, the West has reduced to a systematic drill.'²⁴

Swami Vivekananda was absolutely correct in his assessment; materialism had chased religion away in America. It was the ultimate paradox that a country, where 'God created nature and human beings', 'God created a law of right and wrong', and 'God gave men the same birthrights' were the main religious beliefs; where the coins had the inscription 'In God We Trust'; where the word 'God' was sprinkled everywhere; and where people honestly believed that God was on their side and they were the Chosen People²⁵ could be starving spiritually.

Probably it was for that exact reason that he chose America to deliver his message—a message that religion was essentially realization and experience, not mere acceptance of dogmas and creeds. He saw in America people who were alert, inquisitive, receptive, tremendously honest, well disciplined, adventurous and with sparks of spirituality that kindled at his words. In his message, perceptive Americans found the spiritual basis of freedom so treasured by them. They gave Swami Vivekananda his first recognition, and he was grateful for it.

* * *

If we consider that everyone has two sides—a spiritual side, and a temporal or earthly side—then Swami Vivekananda was that unique individual who reflected the spirituality of India as well as the worldly side of

America. He was the ultimate manifestation of what is good in these two countries. He had some of the stuff Americans are made of, and more.

Referring to an article by Max Muller on immortality, Swami Vivekananda wrote to Mary Hale from Thousand Island Park in 1895: '... he [Max Muller] thinks that those we love in this life we must have loved in the past, so it seems I must have belonged to the Holy Family [meaning the Hale family] in some past life.'²⁶ It is then no wonder he loved

'It is this tendency to bring everything down to the level of a machine that has given the West its wonderful prosperity. And it is this, which has driven away all religion from its doors. Even the little that is left, the West has reduced to a systematic drill.'

America, and it was not a mere coincidence that he chose 4 July, the American Independence Day, to leave his body and be free of worldly bonds. If Chicago was Swami Vivekananda's home away from home,²⁷ then America was his homeland away from home. The years he spent there were some of the best in his life.

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विवेकानन्दस्तुतिः Vivekananda-stutiḥ

रामकृष्णस्य वाग्धारा दिव्यं च कर्मसङ्कुलम् ।
यस्मिन् प्रकाशिते तं वै विवेकानन्दमाश्रये ॥

*Rāmakṛṣṇasya vāgdhārā divyān ca karma-saṅkulam;
Yasmin prakāśite tam vai vivekānandam-āśraye.*

I take refuge in (Swami) Vivekananda through whom the torrent of the words (of wisdom) and host of divine actions of (Sri) Ramakrishna got manifested.

तेजो यस्य यतेर्विलोक्य तरणिलज्जायुतो जायते,
रूपं यस्य मुखस्य चारु मदनो दृष्ट्वा शरीरं जहो ।
वाणीं यस्य गुरोर्निशम्य मधुरां वीणा विमोहं गता,
पादे तस्य नतिर्विवेकसुखिनः सा नस्मदा रक्षतु ॥

*Tejo yasya yater-vilokya taranīr-lajjāyuto jāyate,
rūpam yasya mukhasya cāru madano drṣṭvā śariram jahau;
Vāṇīn yasya guror-niśamya madhuram vīṇā vimoham gatā,
pāde tasya natir-viveka-sukhinah sā nas-sadā rakṣatu.*

Seeing whose brilliance the sun rises abashedly, observing the beauty of whose face Cupid casts off his body, hearing whose, the great Teacher's, sweet voice even the vina is spellbound—to the feet of that Vivekananda we bow down. May this obeisance protect us!

—Swami Harshananda, President, Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore

Reflections on Truth

SWAMI NITYASTHANANDA

What is truth? This is the most fundamental question, and is perhaps as eternal as truth itself. It dates from time out of mind. Saints, philosophers, scientists and thinkers have given varied answers to this most vexing question. Yet, to this day, it remains as fresh as ever. Grappling with this riddle raises man from his animal nature, and the ultimate answer to it will make him Divine. Swami Vivekananda says: 'Man wants truth, wants to experience truth for himself; when he has grasped it, realized it, felt it within his heart of hearts, then alone, declare the Vedas, would all doubts vanish, all darkness be scattered, and all crookedness be made straight.'¹ In fact, this question lies hidden in the inmost recesses of the human mind, but its whisper remains inaudible to most people amid the humdrum of daily life. Sometimes it raises its head and makes its presence felt, but soon it relapses into slumber. The majority of people live in such a fashion as to leave no time to consider such questions—the burden of life looms so large as to make these questions seem trivial, and in some cases even luxurious.

Life Is Based on Truth

All of us live on the basis of truth. Our life, the things around us and our experiences are all real to us. And life is impossible without this faith. None can live in an unreal world. Even those who live in a world of fantasy, find their hallucinations palpably real. When a baby comes out of its mother's womb, it cries desperately, puzzled by the newness of the world around, a world whose reality is yet to be confirmed. Gradually, the surrounding world grows true to him, and the child becomes confident—thereby proving that it is

truth that builds confidence. Suppose a man dreams that he is living in an altogether different world; it leaves a tremendous impression on his mind. If he returns to the waking state too suddenly, he may find this very empirical world illusory. He may even get scared of the entirely different world around, the reality of which he confirms by feeling things around.

We repose confidence in close friends whose words and actions tally with truth, at least for us. We are reluctant to be friendly with those whose words and actions do not carry conviction; we can only love them from a distance. Thus the basis of all human relationship is truth, and it is truth alone that makes our relationships more intense, stable and extensive. One may object to this and say that it is love that makes for relationship, but even love rests on truth. The seeds of love can grow only on the fertile ground of reality. Swami Vivekananda asks: 'If truth is not there, what is the use of life?' (2.473) So he declares: 'Everything can be sacrificed for truth, but truth cannot be sacrificed for anything.' (5.410)

Different Views of Truth

As we said earlier, the question 'What is truth?' has been given different answers by different thinkers and philosophers. Nihilists say that there is nothing called truth and it is all void. Materialists argue that matter alone is true and consciousness is only an epiphenomenon of matter. Advaitins counter this by saying that God alone is real and the phenomenal world is unreal. Empiricists hold that whatever comes within the range of our experience is the only truth. Idealists insist that there is no reality apart from the perceiving mind. Realists, on the other hand, vehemently oppose

this view saying that there is an objective world independent of the perceiving mind. Some idealists opine that qualities alone are true, and there is no need at all to assume any substance. This again does not satisfy some thinkers who say that we have to conceive of a substance in which qualities inhere. Then there are some who insist that for truth to be truth it must also be eternal. But there are some others who are ready to accept even non-eternal truths. So there are theories and theories about truth. In this medley of confusing theories, the Jain comes out with his novel concept that nothing definite can be said about truth and all our opinions about it can only be partial (*syādvāda*). Not adding to the confusion, Buddha remained silent about the whole thing.

Need for a Philosophical Attitude

Yet the human mind cannot rest: reasoning is in its very nature. There are people who aver that reasoning about truth is irrelevant, that it has no practical bearing, and that it is

There are people who aver that reasoning about truth is irrelevant, that it has no practical bearing, and that it is better instead to concentrate our attention on the present problems. But we need to remember that such problems do not get solved by our thinking about them. We have rather to transcend them.

better instead to concentrate our attention on the present problems. But we need to remember that such problems do not get solved by our thinking about them. We have rather to transcend them. The solution to our predicament lies not within it, but beyond it. Today we face innumerable problems because we have sufficiently estranged ourselves from questions about fundamental realities related

to our existence. It behoves us to develop our reasoning faculty to tide over our present psychological distress. We may not know what truth is; still the mental discipline involved in reasoning about truth is imperative. Philosophical thinking will help us develop a philosophical outlook, which in turn will help us view life's problems philosophically. Only then will cease the debilitating effects vicissitudes of life leave on our mind.

Objective Analysis

Suppose there is a wooden table in front of us. It has a form and some smell; it is hard to touch and produces a sound when struck. Among these qualities the most important is form, which is the basis for the appellation 'table'. If the form is removed what remains is just wood. So the table is unreal in this sense. From the standpoint of wood, the table can be considered illusory (*mithyā*). Now, wood has its own form, smell and sound, and these qualities disappear when it is resolved into the primary elements of which it is made. So wood, too, does not have a real existence. When we analyse these primary elements they are reduced to atoms, rendering these elements in turn unreal. Even atoms can be reduced to sub-atomic particles of energy. As the analysis continues, we move from more differentiation to less differentiation, and finally arrive at a reality free from all differentiation. From this basic substance has come

into existence the entire phenomenal world. It is not that this primary substance has transformed itself into different objects; it only appears to be so.

Spirit is the Basic Truth

What is this underlying substance? Is it spirit or matter? Matter is insentient; it cannot think by itself; it cannot speculate about the

basic reality of the world or be aware of itself or other things. It is awareness which distinguishes spirit from matter. Is it that along with matter there is another reality called spirit? If so, what is the relationship between them? If they are entirely different, this question of truth does not arise at all. Nor can we presume that they are a compound, for the idea of compound refers only to material objects. Neither of them has come out of the other, for there cannot be any causal relation between the two. So we are left with the alternative that only one of them can be the basic reality.

If matter alone is true, then we are left with an unanswered question: Where does spirit come from? Suppose, on the other hand, that spirit alone exists. Then what about the phenomenal world with all its mind-boggling diversities? This phenomenal world consists of names and forms. When we subject these names and forms to rigorous analysis, they are reduced to one basic substance and stand exposed as mere appearances. This we have already seen in the previous section. So the fundamental substance has to be spirit, or else we can neither explain nor deny its existence. We have to subscribe ourselves to the view that this phenomenal world is only an apparent manifestation of spirit.

The Nature of Truth

What is the nature of this reality? What are its characteristics? In fact, nothing can be predicated about it. All our ideas of truth are only opinions of it but not the truth itself. According to Sri Ramakrishna, 'What Brahman is cannot be described. All things in the world—the Vedas, the Puranas, the Tantras, the six systems of philosophy—have been defiled, like food that has been touched by the tongue, for they have been read or uttered by the tongue. Only one

thing has not been defiled in this way, and that is Brahman. No one has ever been able to say what Brahman is.² In other words, this truth is to be experienced, not just expressed. 'The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao,' says the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. Meister Eckhart says: 'Why dost thou prate of God? Whatever thou sayest of Him is untrue.'

The following story effectively corroborates this idea. The mystic was back from the desert. 'Tell us,' they said, 'what God is like.' But how could he ever tell them what he had experienced in his heart? Can God be put into words? He finally gave them a formula—inaccurate, inadequate—in the hope that some might be tempted to experience it for themselves. They seized upon the formula, made it a sacred text, imposed it on others as a holy belief and went to a lot of trouble in order to spread it in foreign lands; some even gave their lives for it. The mystic was sad. It might have been better if he had said nothing.³

As a temple priest, Sri Ramakrishna did not embark on his spiritual journey with the definite conception that God resided in the image; he began his quest for truth without any preconceived notions. If Swami Vivekananda had definite ideas about God, perhaps he would not have shown such intense spiritual yearning. Buddha too went in search of truth independently, and so did every mystic.

In context, it is hard to resist the temptation to quote the beautiful words of the Chinese author Lin Yutang: 'He who talks about truth injures it thereby; he who tries to prove it thereby maims and distorts it; he who gives it a label and a school of thought kills it; and he who declares himself a believer buries it. ... The dirge that they all sing at truth's funeral is

"I am entirely right and you are entirely wrong."⁴

Truth Is Obscured by Opinion

Our opinion of truth is itself a great barrier to its realization. As a Buddhist monk once said, truth is ready to reveal itself to us provided we are ready to give up our opinion of it. Every one of us must make an independent approach to reality. If we start with fixed ideas of truth, probably we may not realize it at all. As a temple priest, Sri Ramakrishna did not embark on his spiritual journey with the definite conception that God resided in the image; he began his quest for truth without any preconceived notions. If Swami Vivekananda

The reality underlying the universe is one, though it appears to be divided into two—subject and object. ... We are seeing the objective world as though one wave of the sea is looking at another. When the 'perceiver' wave realizes itself as water and its own form as an illusion, it also comes to know that the 'perceived' wave too is nothing but water and its form illusory.

had definite ideas about God, perhaps he would not have shown such intense spiritual yearning. Buddha too went in search of truth independently, and so did every mystic. In the Upanishad, when the disciple enquired about the nature of Brahman, the teacher told him: 'Know it yourself by the dint of your own self-effort.'⁵

We perceive the phenomenal world through our senses, and the world appears real to us. But what we perceive is only some sense qualities. Apart from these qualities we know nothing about the world. This is applicable not only to our gross perceptions, but also to scientists' subtle perceptions. In other words, we see only qualities, not substances.

Subjective Analysis

Who is it that sees these qualities: the senses or the mind? If it is the senses, it is as good as saying that the camera lens perceives the objects. And if you say that the mind sees, it amounts to saying that the film is the perceiver. Who is the real photographer within, who sees? It is the witnessing Self. Perception is a process, and the senses, mind and the intellect are active participants in this process. There must be some subjective element which perceives the whole process, standing outside it—just like observing the water flow from a river bank. Here 'witnessing' does not imply any action. It means just *being*.

This witnessing Self or spirit cannot be different from the spirit already referred to. For, as we have already observed, the reality underlying the universe is one, though it appears to be divided into two—subject and object, like water divided by a line drawn on it. How it happened is beyond anybody's guess. We are seeing the objective world as though one wave of the sea is looking at another. When the 'perceiver' wave realizes itself as water and its own form as an

illusion, it also comes to know that the 'perceived' wave too is nothing but water and its form illusory.

Subject-Object Duality Is Due to Ignorance

Now the question is, how are these waves formed, how did this subject-object duality come about? If this distinction is real, we have to admit that spirit changes. Spirit, then, is to be categorized as any other object in this world. Then there will be no one to 'perceive', for as we have already said, the perceiver must be free from action and immutable. Thus we cannot admit differentiation in spirit. Therefore, the difference must definitely be due to ignorance. Where did this ignorance

come from? Ignorance not being a substantial entity, we cannot trace its origin. Since it is nothing, nothing can be said about it. Ignorance is nothing but forgetfulness of our real nature—self-forgetfulness. How has this happened? Is this self-forgetfulness due to seeing the phenomenal world, or is it because of self-forgetfulness that we see the world? Like the paradox of the seed and the sprout (*bija-ni-kura-nyāya*), this too is unsolvable.

Even supposing that spirit forgets its real nature, it need not necessarily involve seeing the world. Spirit could just remain as it is in the darkness of its own ignorance. Since it sees the world, it follows that the world must necessarily exist. If that is true, it can only mean transformation of the spirit—which cannot be! So we are left with the only alternative that the phenomenal world is nothing but a false superimposition on spirit.

Individual Inseparable from the Infinite

Clouds in the sky exist in their own state of being. It is we who attribute forms to them, like those of various animals. One who has lost self-identity may see things or hear sounds that have no empirical reality. He may see non-existent things and not see existent ones. Similarly, perhaps, due to self-forgetfulness the pure spirit divides itself as subject and object. The goal of spiritual life is to eliminate individuality by transcending this subject-object duality.

If we perceive the indivisible and infinite spirit behind the empirical experiences of everyday life, most of our petty considerations and selfish motivations would take a backseat.

To the extent we cling to the things of the world, our sense of duality will also increase, for it is not possible to see indivisibility in the world of duality. The sense of duality is the root cause of all selfish motivations. We have to develop a holistic attitude, since our individuality is only an infinitesimal part of the whole totality of existence; our individual life is an inseparable part of infinite life. Then each one of us will go beyond the enclaves of individuality, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and so on and become, like Swami Vivekananda, 'a man without frontiers'. *

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Purity, patience, and perseverance are the three essentials to success, and above all—*love*.

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 281

Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedantism

PROF AMALENDU CHAKRABORTY

William James has rightly remarked that Shankara's Advaita Vedanta is the paragon of all monistic systems. As a hard-core monist Shankara posits the reality of one category and he termed that Brahman. 'Reality is Brahman; It alone was in the beginning' remark the Upanishads. In many passages of the Upanishads it is said that it is impossible to give any positive determinations of the supreme Brahman. The famous passage '*neti, neti*' tells us that Brahman is absolutely non-empirical. It is pure inwardness of which no conceptual interpretation is possible. It is indivisible, inalienable. To define It is to transmute It into an object. We cannot even say that It is one. It is non-dual. For the category of number is not applicable to Brahman. That is why Shankara calls his philosophy Advaita.

It is true that in some of the Upanishadic texts Brahman has been defined as *sat, chit* and *ananda*—existence, consciousness and bliss. But even this description of Brahman cannot directly convey the reality of Brahman. Such descriptions serve only to divert the mind towards Brahman by divesting It of unreality, unconsciousness and blisslessness. Brahman is really *nirguna*, free from attributes.

Saguna and Nirguna Brahman

Shankara, however, points out that we may describe Brahman as the Cause, Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer of the world, and therefore also as an omnipotent and omniscient Being, from the lower standpoint of our practical life. Brahman in this respect is called Saguna Brahman or Ishwara, who is also the object of worship. Saguna Brahman's value 'is restricted to the empirical sphere—a view which is entirely in consonance with the gen-

eral Advaitic position that practical utility need not rest on metaphysical validity'. It is this distinction that has given rise to what are familiarly known as the 'two grades' of teaching in Advaita—the higher one of the Nirguna Brahman and the lower one of the Saguna.

No Two in Shankara's Philosophy

Shankara further holds that the Atman is absolutely non-different from Brahman. We should bear in mind that identity normally implies *two* that are identical, but there is no place for *two* in Shankara's philosophy. So the relation between Atman and Brahman can be adequately stated only in negative terms as non-dual, non-different, and so on. Shankara explains the relation with the analogy of the space outside a jar and inside it. The space both outside and inside the jar is the same. But it is only due to the adjunct of the jar that it appears to be different. In like manner, Atman and Brahman are same. The individual soul is not a microcosm in a macrocosm; it is the macrocosm itself. It is not merely a true index to Reality, but Reality itself. Hence to become Brahman is the highest ideal of Vedanta.

Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedanta

Swami Vivekananda took up the thread of Shankara's philosophy at this stage. He found enough convincing thought in Advaita Vedanta. But he also felt that there was scope in it for intuitive awareness of many aspects of life which it did not encompass. Deeply impressed by the universal heart of Buddha, Vivekananda found sufficient ground and thought to make up for the apparent irreconcilables in Shankara's Advaita Vedanta. He laid down a clear view of life which, if comprehended, will lead us to a far deeper under-

standing and awareness. Though Swamiji got inspiration from Buddha's deep universal love for all beings, he could not endorse all of his philosophy. For the theoretical justification of Buddha's ethical teaching Swamiji had to fall back upon Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, which in his hands takes the form of living Vedanta entering our life and conduct.

But Swamiji's advocacy of Vedanta has some distinctive features. The Vedanta preached by Swami Vivekananda may be rightly called 'Neo-Vedantism', as distinguished from Shankara's Vedanta, which is known as Advaita or non-dualism, pure and simple. Neo-Vedanta is also Advaita insofar as it holds that Brahman, the ultimate Reality, is One without a second. But as distinguished from the traditional Shankara Vedanta, it is said to be 'synthetic Vedanta', insofar as it reconciles Dvaita (dualism) and Advaita (non-dualism), and also other theories of Reality. It may also be called 'concrete monism', insofar as it holds that Brahman is both qualified and qualityless (*saguna* and *nirguna*); It has forms as It is formless (*sakara* and *nirakara*). Swami Vivekananda opines that the various schools of Vedanta do not contradict one another but 'they all necessitate each other, all fulfil each other, and one, as it were, is the stepping-stone to the other, until the goal, the Advaita, the *tat tvam asi*, is reached.'¹ Since Swami Vivekananda is optimistic that all will reach the same goal in the long run, he does not want to deny anyone the right to hold any particular view.

Vedanta from Forest to Everyday Life

Swamiji thinks that the new form of Vedanta he introduces is so simple that even a child can understand its spirit. He wants to make Vedanta poetic so that it may be inspiring to all. He wants to free Vedanta from meta-

physical and theological dogma so that it may be acceptable to all. He has not only introduced a new meaning of Vedanta, but also brought out its undiscovered aspects. This is his most outstanding contribution to the world of thought. Never before was it shown that 'Aranyaka Vedanta'—a philosophy born and bred in the forest—had so much to do with this mundane world. To quote Swamiji: 'These conceptions of the Vedanta must come out, must remain not only in the forest, not only in the cave, but they must come out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit, and in the cottage of the poor man, with the fishermen that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying. They call to every man, woman, and child whatever be their occupation, wherever they may be.' (3.245)

A Doctrine of Social Evolution

Now, the question naturally arises, What would be its impact on society when this is ac-

Swamiji thinks that the new form of Vedanta he introduces is so simple that even a child can understand its spirit. He wants to make Vedanta poetic so that it may be inspiring to all. He wants to free Vedanta from metaphysical and theological dogma so that it may be acceptable to all.

complished? Vivekananda's reply is: 'If you teach Vedanta to the fisherman, he will say, I am as good a man as you; I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher, but I have the same God in me as you have in you. And that is what we want, no privilege for any one, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the divine is within, and everyone will work out his own salvation.' (3.246) Thus privileges break down when Vedantic doctrines are accepted to form the basis of society.

Considered a doctrine for the liberation of a few spiritual aspirants, Vedanta has got

converted into a doctrine of social evolution in the hands of Vivekananda. Swamiji has indicated the significant role of Vedanta in this respect in the following manner: 'We must prove the truth of pure Advaitism in practical life. Shankara left this Advaita philosophy in the hills and forests, while I have come to bring it out of those places and scatter it broadcast before the workaday world and society. The lion-roar of Advaita must resound in every hearth and home, in meadows and groves, over hills and plains.' (7.192)

A Commentary on Sri Ramakrishna

Indeed, the basic concept of Neo-Vedantism is to be found in the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna. In the words of Dr S C Chatterjee,

the main outline of this new Vedanta was drawn by Sri Ramakrishna and it was Swami Vivekananda who filled it in with elaborate reasoning so as to work up a philosophy proper. It has been very aptly said that Swami Vivekananda is a commentary on Sri Ramakrishna. But the commentator with his giant intellect and profound understanding made such distinctive contributions that his commentary becomes itself a philosophy, just as Shankara's commentary on the *Vedanta Sutras* is by itself a philosophy.²

Serving the Divine in Man

According to Swami Vivekananda, Vedanta is the most practical religion ever known to us; for its ideal is to study man as he is. He says: 'In one word, the ideal of Vedanta is to know man as he really is, and this is its message, that if you cannot worship your brother man, the manifested God, how can you worship a God who is unmanifested?' (2.325-6) ... Where is there a more practical God than He whom I see before me—a God omnipresent, in every being, more real than our senses?' (2.305) Swamiji further says that if a person serves God manifest in all beings—not only in man but also in other creatures—without caring for name and fame, or

to go to heaven after death, and expects no return from those whom he serves, such service is really the highest and best. It benefits *him*. Service thus performed in the right spirit of karma yoga becomes worship of Shiva in the *jiva*, and is one of the most effective means of self-purification and God-realization. This identification is the sole source of love for humanity and the mainspring of Swamiji's thought.

The Newness of Swamiji's Neo-Vedanta

Swamiji knew better than other social thinkers of his time that the problems of India were different from those facing Western countries. In India more than 70% of the population was utterly poor. What the hungry millions in India immediately needed was food and other bare necessities of life. The problem of poverty here was complicated by the fact that the poorest people belonged to the lowest caste. So India's problems were predominantly socio-economic. The main problem Swamiji faced was this: Could Neo-Vedanta be applied in life to solve these problems? He was confident that by properly putting the life-giving principles of Vedanta into practice, the individual, social and national problems of India could be solved in the best way possible. This is an aspect of his Practical Vedanta, and it may be more appropriately called 'Vedanta in practical life'. Neo-Vedanta has thus a message for all people and has a universal role to play. 'In no other religion or philosophy and in no other period of human history has the relation between the soul and God found so practical and universal an application in life as in Neo-Vedanta in modern times. That is precisely what makes it really 'new'.³

One of the brilliant landmarks of this progressive and creative message of Vedanta is that it is geared to the all-round happiness of people and thus paves the way for modernism. It bridges the gulf between science, religion and philosophy. Besides all these achievements, it frees Vedanta from lifeless

scholastic arguments and the narrow groove of academic discussion in which it lay buried for many centuries. The new Vedanta eschews the abstract reasoning and discussion of mere intellectual faith. It has become a new gospel of work and creative progress, fertilizing every aspect of human life. The life-giving ideas of Vedanta have to be practised in life.

Swamiji wanted us first to bring about transformation in our own minds, which will then lead to the awakening of the soul. As a true reformer, he believed in the enduring benefit of moral and spiritual awakening of people, which alone can bring forth new humane developments among mankind. He found the real source of that true reformation in the philosophy of Advaita. Let human ships float on the bosom of the divine waters of life. The strong conviction of soul-consciousness alone will motivate people to go forward.

Vedanta as a Tool for Human Growth

We know that even in India the blueprint for a new culture based on spiritual life was never presented on a massive scale. The old ideas of philosophy, leading to lifeless academic discussions, never showed any concern for the well-being of people. Swamiji wanted to place before mankind the powerful idealism of Advaita, to make it a powerful vehicle of social transformation through spiritual transformation. From the fullness of his loving heart, he spoke about its glorious future with the vigorous enthusiasm of his tremendous personality. The music of his illumined soul was heard in India, entering into the very bloodstream of its life. His entire scheme of human development was based on this central idea—the divinity of life. He won the hearts of people with his originality, expressing Advaita in novel language and refreshing it with new spiritual vigour. Being a spiritual teacher of extraordinary character, he was able to teach people the same eternal message of Vedanta for their everyday life. He at-

tempted to project the undivided view of Reality that would bridge the gulf between sacred and secular, work and worship, jnana and karma.

Man the Central Pillar of Swamiji's Edifice

The dearest object of Swamiji's loving adoration is 'man'. His mission is man-centred; man is the central pillar of his philosophical edifice. Swamiji naturally raised the dignity, divinity, mystery and worth of man to the pinnacle of divine excellence. He discovered from Advaita Vedanta itself the real source of human happiness. He gave Vedanta a new depth and dimension by asserting its tremendous potentiality to create a social revolution leading to the well-being of the masses. He was a staunch Advaitist, yet his brilliant analysis, his rational arguments and his catholic temper are all very fresh in the field of Vedanta. Vivekananda performed the extraordinary feat of breathing life into the static monism of Shankara. Really, Swamiji was the inaugurator of the Neo-Vedantic movement in India. Indeed, Vedanta whispers the truth of that great formula of the Upanishads into our ears and minds—*tat tvam asi*—so that the whole of life becomes a gradual unfoldment of the infinite possibilities hidden within all of us. Would it not be a blessed day for us and for the rest of the world when we begin to joyfully work towards that end? *

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Pilgrims on the Fourfold Path

SWAMI SUNIRMALANANDA

1. Becoming the Beloved

The Call

It was dark. The muddy road was deserted. Tall trees stood on either side. The full moon shone brightly above. Here and there she could hear a tiger roar or a wild boar snort. The shadow of the trees that fell on the road created shapes strange enough to scare one. Not her. She had heard the call and come.

The walk seemed endless. Soon the road ended and she entered the jungle. Her steps faltered. 'Was it true? Did I hear it clearly? Was it really the call?'

Yes, it was real. She remembered the heavenly sweetness of the call. And so she was here, walking in the dark. But the walk seemed endless.

As she walked through the jungle path, moonlight played hide and seek. She lingered. But why should she wait? She had heard the call, and she should walk. Then there was that thought: 'What if mother-in-law wakes up and misses me? What if my husband gets to know I've come away? How would father-in-law react? Where shall I go if they turn me out? ... What am I doing?'

Then she heard it again. That melodious tune, that sweetest of all sweet sounds; distant, yet distinct; soothing, yet seeking. It was lyrical, heavenly—sweetness itself. It melted into her, making her forget everything—her worries, her pain, her misery, her own body. And it created intense longing. It appeared to assure her over and over again: 'Forget all your vain cares and concerns.'

All thoughts stilled now; all doubts vanished. She began to run in the wilderness towards that melody. He was calling her: He, her beloved lord. Ah, what a call it was! How

sweet!

The Struggle

She had wept for years and waited for ages to hear this call. She had suffered and struggled, pined and panted, and spent sleepless nights in anticipation, enduring every hardship. And now the call had come.

How much she had to suffer! What a heavy price the world extracts! How much it had cost her to maintain her purity! What price one has to pay to be devoted to him! Her capacity to endure had been tested time and again. Yet she could bear that all. The call was divine. She had won in the end.

She was not advanced in years for all that she had endured; just a little girl of ten or twelve, married when hardly five. She had to work very hard in order to please her husband and in-laws, but could not. Her secret anguish was their problem, her secret prayers their difficulty. Her secret tears and sleepless nights were their suspicion. They strongly disapproved of her love for someone who was not her husband. But love she did. And now the call had come.

And there were her friends, all good and happy—or so her people said. She alone was different. And that irked her people greatly. Her type was rare. One or two there were in other villages. But they were far off, and she could not reach them. She was alone. 'But that part of my life is over now,' she thought.

Suddenly, a startling screech abruptly broke her reverie.

The Way

Perhaps a wild animal. But the noise had

brought her back to her senses. Where was she now? In which part of the jungle? Was she going along the right path? Was it a path at all, anyway? It was all trees, shrubs and bushes—total wilderness. Something flashed past her and for a moment she shuddered. Then she relaxed and smiled at herself. Why was she getting unnecessarily worried? What life was now left for her, after all? She did not have much choice: she could either proceed or return. But the second she would not. So she salied forth.

The Hurdle

Thorns raked her, blood trickled down her legs, but she cared not. Through her tears she smiled at her predicament. 'Forward, onward,' she told herself. She had to follow the call.

Now a pond blocked her way, and her energy dried up. She could exert no more. She cried aloud: 'O lord, You called and I came! Where are you now? Where are you?'

The forest answered—with deafening silence. What other option did she have but to walk into the pond. The water was neck-deep, but walk through it she did. When she found it impossible to continue, she cried again: 'My lord! Please save me! Please come to me!'

Again, the same lilting tune; the same divine melody. It maddened her. Who worried about bodily comfort, who cared for the world after such a thrilling experience?

Not this gopika at least. Yes, she was a gopika.

The rapturous tune came from the celestial flute of her beloved Krishna. She heard it quite distinctly now. Yes, it was coming from very near. It had enamoured a few other gopikas of nearby villages too. It was this flute that had captivated them, as it did her.

'My lord, don't hide yourself any more. You're waiting for me, I know!' she cried and ran in the water. When at last she reached the other side, she was wet to her bones, but excited, thrilled. She wanted to run. But where? Where was her Krishna? She looked around. Except for the moonlit jungle she found nothing. Was he further inside? Eagerly she ran. She stood on a rock and peered into the night. The night stared back. She climbed down and tried to move on. But the jungle had trapped her!

The Union

That was it. She had had enough. She realized that her powers had utterly failed her: she could never reach him by herself. She collapsed on the ground, weeping aloud: 'O my Krishna! Please come to me. Please do come.' But who would hear her in that forest, at the dead of night? The silence terrified her. What would she do now? She closed her eyes in sheer fear.

It was then that she felt a cool touch on her arm. Was it a branch? She opened her eyes. No, it was the flute! Krishna was standing behind her! The king of her heart, her all in all, was right behind her, with a bewitching smile! She swooned for joy.

2. Becoming the Infinite

The Call

Welcome,' he said with a smile. It was the smile of a world-conqueror. The stranger came closer and fell on the ground like a rod. The master lifted him up. 'Get up, my son,' he said.

The stranger rose to his feet. He gazed at the smiling face of the elderly master, but did

not speak. The deer grazing nearby sneaked up on the master to have a closer look at the stranger; the birds stopped chirping, wondering who the stranger might be; the calves of the hermitage looked at him curiously.

The visitor bent forward and offered the bundle of firewood he had brought for the master. The master nodded approvingly.

'Master ...' he began in a choked voice; but could say no more.

'Who are you, my child? What brings you here?' asked the master with a compassionate smile.

'Master, I've come to you with great hopes. Please save me, please show me the way out of all this misery and suffering.' The master remained silent. The visitor knelt before him and pleaded: 'I've struggled a lot, suffered much in search of true happiness. At last I've come to you. You must save me, Master, I'm burning, I can't wait any more!'

The Struggle

He looked as if in great anguish.

'Who are you?' asked the master again, patiently.

'Not too long ago I was quite well-to-do, in the worldly sense of the term. I had everything. I thought I was happy. But panic seized me when I saw death. Then I began my struggle. I tried all that my elders advised. Still real peace eluded me ...'

The master walked towards the tree and sat down on his seat. The visitor followed and knelt before him.

'Tell me what all you did,' said the master.

'Sir, your humble servant doesn't know much about higher life or spirituality. I only did what the elders of my area asked me to do. They told me to study the Vedas, and I learned many mantras by heart. They told me to perform sacrifices, and I did. It was difficult, but did not bring peace. Then they told me to atone for my sins, to avoid evil. I did all that. They wanted me to practise my daily devotions earnestly. I'm doing that now. But still the peace my heart craves seems nowhere in sight. So I've come to you. I've heard a lot about your greatness, Master. Kindly show me the way.'

The Way

'Go on,' said the master.

'I don't remember to have ever done anything bad; I don't even think an evil thought. Yet why am I so bereft of peace? By your grace, I've understood that this world is evanescent. I don't care about it any more. I always meditate on the impermanence of everything. But still I'm so unfulfilled. I can't find peace at all. This misery torments me, Master! I want to know *that* by knowing which I shall have true happiness and peace. Please bestow that knowledge on me, Master. Please save me!'

His earnest prayers could have melted a stone. But the master just smiled and said, 'All in good time.'

The man now began to rub his face on the ground in desperation. 'For God's sake, don't reject me, Master! Please don't say no! You know how much I've gone through. I don't want to live in ignorance any more.'

The Hurdle

The sage nodded, with an understanding smile. 'I'm happy you've come this far in search of peace, to get out of maya's hold. But your conclusions about the practices you undertook aren't quite right. You say you performed yajnas and rituals but did not get peace. Maybe, but you've indeed attained purity of mind. That's where you've scored.'

'But what about my suffering?'

'All the practices you mentioned—sacrifices, daily devotions, avoidance of evil—are good. They have all benefited you greatly. Your approach has been correct. In fact, you are where you are because of those disciplines. It's they that have brought you virtues like discrimination, dispassion, and faith in the teacher. I see you're fit to tread the arduous path of liberation. You are pure, you are full of renunciation, you are a real *mumukshu*, a seeker of liberation! I shall instruct you in the knowledge of Brahman ... but you still have to wait for a while.'

The disciple was all eagerness now. 'Master, now that you've understood me fully, you know what I'm seeking. Kindly

shower your grace on me!"

'Yes, you'll find what you're seeking,' the sage said gravely, 'but you have to wait. Why don't you wait?'

The disciple fell silent.

The master continued: 'If you attain the highest knowledge, you're going to lose your individuality. You can't enjoy anything at all!'

'But I'm tired of my so-called individuality, sir! Are you testing me?' The teacher smiled.

'Master, I can wait no longer. Kindly in-

struct me. Show me that supreme Truth which will free me from bondage and misery!'

The compassionate master was moved. After giving the disciple some preliminary instructions, he said: 'Now listen carefully—'You are That!''

The Union

The disciple went into a deep meditation.

3. Becoming the Real

The Call

I've made it, at last! I have attained it!' 'What makes you shout like that?' asked the teacher.

'Oh, I've attained the highest!' the meditator exclaimed again. 'I'm full! I'm so happy!'

'But why shout? What have you attained?'

The thrilled meditator once again declared with joy: 'Ah, how grand! I'm the greatest! I am verily the Purusha, the Self! I am everything!'

The teacher was a master yogi. He knew. 'Had you really achieved what you claim to have, you'd be in samadhi now. Obviously you haven't,' he thought. 'Come on! Let's see what you've attained,' he asked the meditator.

'Teacher, you know what I was when I came to you; I was dull as that rock. Not any more. I've now discovered that I am all-powerful. I can create new bodies; I can even enter a corpse. If I want, I can fly like a bird, become as big as a mountain and as small as an insect. I can create anything. I've just to concentrate, do a bit of *samyama* on whatever I wish to become—and that I become! Ah, the thrill of it!'

The Struggle

'Oh really,' said the teacher casually. The meditator was a bit disappointed; that was

throwing cold water on his enthusiasm. The teacher's reaction aroused suspicion: was he worried to see a rival in him? No doubt the teacher had made a name as an adept, but did it trouble him that his own pupil had overtaken him?

'Sir, I won't wait here. What I've attained is for the good of the world. I shall soon be leaving this place.'

The teacher read his mind. He became sombre. It was time the stupid fellow woke up to reality.

'You fool!' he burst out.

Ah, there he was! The pupil thought he had shrewdly assessed the teacher; he was right in anticipating rivalry. He had to be bold now. Why should he worry, he was as great a yogi as anyone. He said: 'But I'm not going to start a quarrel. I'd rather leave this place and use my yogic knowledge to help the world.'

His words should have incensed the teacher, but he laughed in his face. 'Oh, you want to help the world, don't you?' he mocked. 'Go ahead! Do it by all means ... but first attain something.' Becoming serious, he continued: 'Don't you remember my telling you that you might come across these powers on your way to enlightenment? Didn't I warn that they too were obstacles—much like the dullness, sleepiness and lack of interest that

you encountered earlier? These too are obstacles. You think you've become a master yogi just because you can float in the air! Fool!"

The Way

The disciple hung his head in shame.

The yogi continued: 'There are charlatans in the world parading as saints by working miracles. The world highly reveres them because it only wants such stuff. Cure a sickness, hand out a talisman—and the world is happy. But can such things remove existential suffering? It's like trying to cure the symptom rather than the disease, which resurfaces after a time. I wanted you to become a true yogi—a man of knowledge of the glorious Purusha within. But I see you're still busy with this dead matter called Prakriti—and you think you have attained everything! Shame on you!"

The Hurdle

These words set the disciple thinking: 'Is all that I've accomplished after years of meditation just nothing?' He mustered his courage and said, 'Master, do you mean to say all this is worthless? Maybe it appears so to someone like you, but imagine the suffering of the world! See how people are suffering endlessly due to disease and pain. Surely I could use my powers to serve them ...'

'Indeed!' the guru lifted his brows in affected sympathy. 'So you're going to end the miseries of the world? Grand, may God help you! But remember this: if you heal a boil on the leg, it'll show on the face—unless the blood is purified. So you risk bringing more suffering on the very people you wish to save—and you'll be cursed for that. Anyway, go

ahead, my son; save the world!'

The disciple was thoroughly confused. He returned to his seat under the tree and pondered: was his guru right, or was he trying to discourage him out of jealousy?

Suddenly, he felt something heavy on his lap. He opened his eyes and saw a plateful of delicious food. He looked around in surprise and found his teacher smiling at him. Then he understood that his guru had read his mind, that he too had similar powers and could use them at will.

The yogi walked towards the pupil and said, 'See? Powers are nothing for a yogi. Once you attain the highest, all these become your slaves instead of obstacles. I never use them; but now I had to to make you realize your mistake. And never doubt the guru; that too is an obstacle.'

The disciple was thoroughly humbled. He sat there crestfallen. The teacher affectionately patted his back: 'You will be a great yogi, my child. I see that. And *that* will help the world.'

The Union

The disciple fell at his master's feet. Regretting his vanity, he said, 'Holy One, what am I to do now? I've strayed from the royal path. All my years of sadhana have come to naught.'

'No, my son' assured the teacher. 'Nothing ever goes waste. Until now you did *sam-yama* only on certain things of Prakriti. Now do it on your own intellect. That is the highest possible concentration. Then watch the fun of Prakriti's dance for the Purusha.' That the disciple did.

4. Becoming Everything

The Call

You've saved me,' he said, shedding tears of gratitude. 'Don't mention it. What have I done for you, after all?' the karma

yogi replied. 'It's our duty to help people in distress. Compassion is a great virtue, and I'm only trying to put into practice what I've heard from elders.'

Wiping his tears, the patient whispered, 'You are indeed a god!'

His strange disease was infectious and his own people had forsaken him. But this unknown karma yogi had taken it upon himself to restore him to health. He had nursed him unflinchingly when everyone else avoided him.

The Struggle

The patient returned home a happy man. But the karma yogi brooded. 'Maybe I've made the patient happy, but what about me? What have I done for my own soul? I continue to remain what I was in spite of all this bringing happiness to others. When will my problems end?' he thought.

Years ago, when questions like these had begun to worry him, a guru had suggested that he work for others. The karma yogi now returned to his guru for more guidance. 'Sir, you said that my condition would improve if I served others. I've been doing that, but I'm afraid it hasn't helped me much. Strange to say, I make others happy but I'm myself sad!'

'May I know with what attitude you serve?' probed the guru.

'Why,' replied the karma yogi, 'I serve them with utmost compassion and love. I serve them with all my heart. Still, why can't I be happy?'

The Way

'That's the trouble. You *want* to be happy. The rule is to seek nothing, not even happiness. Yes, it's a tall order, but not so difficult. One more thing: you say you serve with utmost compassion. I'd never think of such a thing! Who are we to show compassion? We can only serve people with humility, as if we were worshipping God Himself.'

'God! Forget God!' the karma yogi blurted out. 'Where was God when I drowned in wave after wave of suffering? I don't want to have anything to do with such a God.'

'All right, all right, let's forget God—that

too is acceptable in karma yoga! You don't need to think of Him now. Look upon others as you look upon yourself and serve them. You don't think of yourself as just this body, do you? Nor do you think of yourself as only the mind. You are something more. Try to regard others also as this "something more". That should do for now.'

The Hurdle

Yes, the guru was right: all the time the karma yogi had been working with a seriously flawed notion. From now on he began to serve others more meaningfully, in the light of his guru's words. Yet doubts lingered.

One day he saw a poor boy lying by the roadside, his body covered with sores. The karma yogi immediately picked him up, cleaned him and dressed his wounds, and did everything he could to serve the boy. Then he admitted him to an orphanage. Nobody could have done more, but the karma yogi himself was still dissatisfied.

Again he went to his guru.

'All those whom I serve are happy,' he complained. 'Even then I am unable to find lasting happiness.'

'Do you identify yourself with those whom you serve? Or does the idea that your service benefits others still persist?'

This had not occurred to the karma yogi before. Of course he had not thought of *identifying* himself with others. This was something new. He too was diseased, he too was poor—only in a deeper sense! Did he ever think he was one with those he served? Did he ever imagine that he was a mere instrument in the hands of an unseen Power? Whom was he trying to help, anyway? The world? or himself? ... Oh, how he'd blundered!

The Union

The karma yogi experienced a new awakening. All living beings were inter-related, strung together, as it were, like a row of gems on a string. And that string, which held

everything together, was the Divine itself. We are all one. One man's suffering is another's suffering too. He was the server, he was also the served; he was the consoler and also the consoled.

It was a revelation. So long the karma yogi had believed that it was he who worked.

Now he realized that he was at best a humble instrument in the hands of that divine Power, which inspires and guides all work.

As the karma yogi worked, his little self began to shed its limitations. It went on expanding and expanded till it became one with the Unlimited.

5. The Conference of Free Birds

The Devotee

She was in tears as she narrated her experiences: 'What a joy it is to be one with my lord! He saved me from the terrible world and made me one with him. It is an endless joy to be with him. I am always with him, sing and dance for him, serve and love him dearly and enjoy supreme indescribable bliss every moment of my life.'

The stranger who became a jnani said: 'What you say is all good, but I don't like this weeping and wailing at all. Why should one weep? Nobody asked you to remain in ignorance. Nobody said you should suffer for long the illusion called world. It's we who were happy with delusion, and it's we who overcame ignorance. And about your lord and all that, you're just being silly. *You* were in ignorance and *you* must come out of it. Your lord has nothing to do with all that.'

The gopika replied: 'Holy sir, you may be right in saying that I was ignorant in bringing suffering upon myself. But how can a poor little girl like me know about ignorance and its removal? It's all my dear Krishna who saved me. But for him, I would have known neither ignorance nor being one with him in joy.'

The jnani said caustically, 'Once again that ignorant talk of delusion and ignorance. Will you learn at all?

'Sir,' replied the gopika, 'I told you I was a helpless little gopika. You are right; I may be ignorant and foolish. But my Krishna is my light and knowledge; he is my all in all.'

The Yogi

'What more shall I say? It's folly to be wise where ignorance is bliss. Had you had an illumined guru, you would have understood what to do and what not to. Your bondage was false and so is your lord. Brahman is the sole Reality. Tears are not enough, O gopika.'

The meditator who became a yogi then spoke: 'Lord or no lord, ignorance or no ignorance, guru or no guru—one can still attain the highest. O jnani, you are right in saying we were bound. We know Prakriti bound us, and through sadhana we became free. We don't call Prakriti false. She who creates this varied universe and all of us, is something very true. We are not fools to deny something that exists and causes suffering. But we also know Prakriti is unconscious and so we reach the truth leaving it behind. Free I'm now from the hold of Prakriti.'

'Your Prakriti does everything of itself, eh? What could be more funny! The mountain flies of itself. A stone jumps of itself. What a theory! Dead matter to create the universe and yourself! Anyway, I don't want to say anything. Whoever wants to be bound will be bound. Whoever wants to be liberated will be liberated. Brahman alone is real, and ignorance makes Brahman appear as many and bound. You too are bound only on account of that.'

The meditator retorted: 'Do you think what you've achieved alone is real, and the rest are fools? You haven't yet known the Purusha. It is hardly a surprise that you are still bound.'

The Worker

The karma yogi finally said: 'Enough of your silly, polemical discussions. If only you had devoted yourselves to the service of the Lord in human beings instead of such blah, blah, how much you could have attained! Instead, you are discussing Brahman, Purusha, and so on. All these are mere words. The world is suffering. One who calls himself bound and one who calls himself liberated, both are bound. He who sees the Lord in the *jiva* and serves Him alone knows the path.'

The jnani felt it better to ignore such talk. So he remained silent.

The gopika said, 'What you say may be true. But where shall a poor and humble girl like me go to serve others? When I was in the world, I had to serve my family so much. I just held on to my Krishna and was saved from the world. But for him ...'

The Jnani

The jnani became angry now: 'Now, enough of your weeping and wailing. We are in a place full of joy and you keep on wailing. Instead of spending your energy in shedding tears, you could have gone to some illumined guru who would have shown you the Truth. That would have stopped all your wailing. To waste this human birth in weeping and wailing!'

The yogi said: 'And you too should stop being rude. Just because you saluted your guru, you think you became illumined. Illumination is not magic. It's not that easy, sir. I think you had done a lot of yogic practices in your previous lives. You must have meditated a lot. Without disciplines like *yama*, *niyama* one can attain nothing. Illumination is not that easy. All the past impressions, all your *vasanas*, should be burnt. That needs a lot of meditation. Your guru whispered something, and you attained? Well, ...'

The jnani ignored him.

The karma yogi said: 'You have your problems too, haven't you, O meditator? It's

as if you've achieved everything by your meditation alone. Meditation! Easier said than done! In this age, is it easy to sit in meditation? Moreover, thousands of hours of meditation are needed. I'd have rather kept my eyes open instead of closing them; I'd have looked around to see the Divine in suffering human beings. Stop your so-called meditation; go and serve them. It will be far easier to attain illumination through service rather than meditation.'

* * *

Seeing their discussion, the gopika became bold. She said: 'I don't understand all that you all are discussing, revered sirs. But I understand only this much. I'm a poor, illiterate, ignorant girl. I did not know all those techniques you speak of. I just cried, "My lord! My lord!" and he came. That's all.'

The jnani said now: 'I didn't do even that. I merely said "I am He" and became That. No weeping at all.'

The meditator said: 'You are forgetting the years of your preparation. You didn't attain what you say you did just by repeating "I am He." You have struggled a lot before. Be truthful, dear sir. My case is better. I would rather say I was meandering in this Prakriti for many births. And the moment I learnt I was not this Prakriti but that glorious "I", I attained it. No "I am He", no tricks. Struggle and attain—that was my philosophy.'

The jnani said: 'What could you attain that didn't exist already? What is born should die. Your knowledge, which is born, will die one day. But I didn't *attain* my knowledge. It was there already. I had forgotten it as you all still have. When my ignorance was removed, that knowledge shone of itself. That's all. It was a revelation. What is created is destroyed. This weeping girl, yourself and that servant of human beings, all have created your knowledge. So none of you is perfect yet.'

The karma yogi said: 'I don't understand what the jnani said. But I didn't have to do

even as much as he did. I just did what everyone does. And used my spare time for something good. And there I was, become one with the Infinite in everything.'

The jnani lost his patience: 'Can't there be a limit to foolishness? There can't be Infinite and everything at the same time. There's only One, and that is the Truth. That's the infinite Brahman. ... What do you say, weeping girl? You were saying something like there's only One. Convince this karma yogi now.'

'I can't, holy sir,' replied the gopika. 'I never said there's only one. My lord can have infinite forms and infinite names. He is infinite, yet he is my Krishna. It's my Krishna who has created everything. If he wants, he can create more. I know nothing but him. He descends from Vaikuntha whenever he wants to save his humble servants.'

And so it went.

The Culmination

This mad discussion would have continued no end. But then that divine Voice—soft, deep, thrilling—was heard everywhere: 'As many faiths, so many paths.' That was not all. It was followed by a thundering echo. Its reverberations thrilled the whole universe. It came from the Beyond, the Supreme, for the benefit of mankind:

Each soul is potentially divine.

The goal is to manifest this divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal.

Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy—by one, or more, or all of these—and become free.

This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.

*

Departure Lounge

ASufi of forbidding appearance arrived at the doors of the palace. No one dared to stop him as he made his way right up to the throne on which the saintly Ibrahim ben Adam sat.

'What is it you want?' asked the king.

'A place to sleep in this caravanserai.'

'This is no caravanserai. This is my palace.'

'May I ask who owned this place before you?'

'My father. He is dead.'

'And who owned it before him?'

'My grandfather. He is dead too.'

'And this place where people lodge for a brief while and move on—did I hear you say it was not a caravanserai?'

Everyone is in the departure lounge!

—Anthony de Mello, The Prayer of the Frog, 2.78-9

A Brief Overview of Indian Culture and Spirituality

SWAMI SANDARSHANANANDA

The higher the culture of a nation, the sublimer is its conception of God.' The truth of this statement is better understood when India is kept in perspective. Highly developed ideas of God have come down to the people of India from time immemorial, from generation to generation, through the master-disciple continuity of communication. This is a feature peculiar to the genius of Indian tradition. In the ancient times sages perceived that God was the biggest as well as the subtlest Reality. He was all-pervasive, all-powerful and all-knowing. Realizing the fact that His influence was absolute and independent of time, space and causation, they established the Religion Eternal, which could be acceptable to all people, cutting across colour, clime and creed. As a result of their exertions evolved a way of life where religion and culture became one and inseparable from each other. A philosophy of life based on spiritual endeavour and experience was, therefore, simultaneously available.

The Uniqueness of the Vedas

The Vedas are the most important achievement of the Indian cultural movement. They are the basis of the Religion Eternal. But they were not limited by any books. They were understood to be Knowledge itself, 'that which is cognizable by the subtle, super-sensuous power of yoga' and not 'that which is cognizable by the five ordinary senses of man'. It is ever-existent, without beginning or end. Hence, 'the Vedas are the only exponent of a universal religion'. They 'being the first, most complete, and the most undistorted collection of spiritual truths, deserve to occupy

the highest place among the scriptures, command the respect of all nations of the earth and furnish the rationale of all their respective scriptures'. Excluding those portions where the Vedas deal with history, tradition and other secular matters, the rest is all spiritual knowledge. The truths contained in them are not confined to any particular place, time or people. That knowledge of the super-sensuous power, available in the Vedas, is the real religion, which also happens to be the driving force of Indian culture. Its fullest manifestation in a person transforms him into a seer who is able to visualize the Reality beyond the temporal phenomena. So a seer is called a poet par excellence possessing the vision unlimited.

The Power of Tolerance

The unity Indians discovered behind names and forms endowed them with a sense of tolerance that is the very essence of cohesion in a multiracial society. They made 'unity in diversity' practical in every sphere of life, making it the hallmark of their civilization. Dr S Radhakrishnan remarks in his *Hindu View of Life* that 'Hinduism does not mistake tolerance for indifference.' Its practice was spontaneous and complete, for the idea 'That which exists is One; sages call It by various names' was repeated, says Swami Vivekananda, 'in the land till it had entered into the blood of the nation, till it began to tingle with every drop of blood that flowed in its veins, till it became one with the life, part and parcel of the material of which it was composed; and thus the land was transmuted into the most wonderful land of toleration, giving the right to welcome the var-

ious religions as well as all sects into the old mother country.¹

The course of Indian history also points to the fact that the power of tolerance was all-absorbing. This significant factor did not escape the attention of foreign observers who visited the country from time to time and the orientalists who did Indological studies later. G C M Birdwood writes in his *Arts of India*:

The Persian and Greek invasions, the Afghan and Mongol (Turkoman) conquests exerted no lasting effect on the national mind of India, which has ever in the end subdued to its nature all the conquerors of that glorious land, and their social life, their administration, and arts; and the thoughts and feelings, and the habits and customs of the Hindus will never be changed except under influences of a purely indigenous origin, proceeding from the development of internal consciousness of the race.

Intuition and introspection are considered to be the two principal rewards of spiritual exercise. They bring about a silent intrinsic transformation in an aspirant. What is true of an individual is also true of a nation tuned to the same ideology. So the Hindus have a national psyche actively disposed to evoke such traits of national character as alluded by Birdwood.

Required: A Different Skill

Cultural factors like these, which we come across in the Indian context, are not intelligible to academic discussion alone. India's cultural history is the tale of an intricate, dynamic spiritual process that becomes tangible only to the spiritually inclined mind. In view of this speciality, Sister Nivedita says, 'The country is her own record. She is the history that we must learn to read.'² Undoubtedly, it requires a different kind of skill to be knowledgeable about India. A casual reading of her exterior reveals almost nothing of her soul. That needs exploration of the spiritual wealth she has accumulated over millennia and its demonstration in the lives of saints born in dif-

ferent periods of her history. Reflections of the nation's spiritual conviction fall everywhere; and one is likely to be led into blind alleys unless one is discerning.

For instance, an artistic creation of an image of a god or goddess is really evaluated only when the subject's facial expression is appreciated properly. That face is generally a blending of earthly and heavenly looks—usually a beatific smile depicting spiritual tranquillity—which shows an element of pure Indianness. To such a mind, grafting an animal head on to a human body does not look repulsive. The figure of Ganesha is a masterpiece of perfect congruence of two shapes of opposing characters. Its classy representation inspires a wonderful aesthetic sense that draws artists to create beautiful works. The combination of this-worldliness and other-worldliness is a hallmark of the rich synthesis that is typical of Indian culture.

Buddha's Spiritual Democracy

In India, obliteration of people's religious rights has never passed without reaction from within society. The appearance of Buddhism at a conspicuous moment in her history was unavoidable, considering the severity of priesthood prevalent then. Selfish priests had barred common people from practising the Religion Eternal by coercion and undermined the spirit of democracy in the realm of religion. Buddha restored it providing equal opportunity to those who were discriminated against, not excluding the low-born. He gave the old religion a simple new form and applied it for the annihilation of human suffering. He salvaged the abiding spiritual values from the shrouds of complex ritualistic practices and used them for the moral progress of humanity. His teaching gave a new turn to art, literature and philosophy. Though he was God-intoxicated he did not depend on words to express himself.

Buddha's followers later began to worship him as God and led their lives according

to his teachings for their own salvation, which, of course, was in accord with the national legacy left behind by his precursors.

Sri Ramakrishna's Uniqueness

As Buddha was one of the most spiritually accomplished products of Indian culture so were many other God-men of his ilk. Sri Ramakrishna happens to be the latest of them. In the light of his own experiences he sums up the purport of Indian culture very briefly in just a single sentence: 'The purpose of human life is to realize God.' Although it sounds simplistic, yet it is the most appropriate conclusion derivable in regard to the consummation of Indian culture.

Sri Ramakrishna's life was a ceaseless interaction with God. Side by side he also displayed extraordinary facility in various arts. From his very childhood he was proficient in singing, dancing, acting, storytelling, clay-modelling, and so on. He could enthrall his listeners with spiritual talks touching on the problems of life. All these along with his frequent spiritual ecstasies set him apart as an outstanding personality, embodying the finest elements of Indianness in his character. At a time when Indians were losing faith in their roots due to the absence of an exemplar of cultural identity, his advent instilled in them a new confidence in their own cultural greatness. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna's contributions sparked off a resurgence of Indian religion and culture. His life was a demonstration, as Romain Rolland said, 'of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people'.

Sri Ramakrishna was the living embodiment of the Religion Eternal. In his own life he 'infused the universal spirit and character of this Dharma', making himself an object lesson

for modern man. Swami Vivekananda proclaims the greatness of his life and message:

But strong in the strength of this new spiritual renaissance, men, after reorganising these scattered and disconnected spiritual ideals, will be able to comprehend and practise them in their lives and also to recover from oblivion those that are lost. And as the sure pledge of this glorious future, the all-merciful Lord has manifested in the present age, ... an incarnation which in point of completeness in revelation, its synthetic harmonising of all ideals and its promoting of every sphere of spiritual culture, surpasses the manifestations of all past ages.³

A Sublime Concept of God

Sri Ramakrishna's practice of all major religions of the world was a practical demonstration of the principle of tolerance that India so earnestly nurtures. His affirmation of the harmony of religions after that practice is a precious bequest to entire humanity. God is one, though the ways to His realization are various. India's signal contribution to world culture, this truth is equally valuable to all nations. Sri Ramakrishna set an example worthy of emulation by people of all faiths.

A sublime form of culture has given a sublime concept of God to Indians; and in Him they hope to bring together the whole globe as one unified family. *

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3. CWSV, 6.185.

The whole of Nature is worship of God. Wherever there is life, there is this search for freedom and that freedom is the same as God.

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 1.337

The Pāñcarātra Āgamas: A Brief Study

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

Agamas are a special class of Hindu religio-philosophical literature handed down through a succession of teachers from the most ancient days. Whether they represented a system parallel to and separate from the Vedic traditions or a continuation of the same and rooted in them, has been a subject of discussion among scholars. However, Yāmunācārya (918-1038 AD) in his scholarly work *Āgamaprāmāṇya* has conclusively established their affinity with the Vedas. Of the three kinds of Āgamas, the Śaiva, the Śākta (or the Tantra) and the Vaiṣṇava, the Pāñcarātra Āgamas belong to the last group. The other branch of the Vaiṣṇava Āgamas is the *Vaikhānasa Āgama*, or the *Vaikhānasa Sūtras*.

Derivation of the Name

The literal meaning of the word Pāñcarātra is 'that which is connected with five nights'. Lord Keśava (Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa) is said to have taught this esoteric science to Ananta, Garuḍa, Viśvaksena, Brahmā and Rudra over five nights (*pañca* = five; *rātra* = night). The word *rātra* also means *jñāna*, wisdom or knowledge. Since it teaches five kinds of knowledge it is called Pāñcarātra. These are *tattva* (cosmology), *muktiprada* (that which gives *mukti*, or liberation), *bhaktiprada* (that which confers devotion), *yaugika* (*yoga*) and *vaiśayika* (objects of desire). Or, alternatively, since it teaches about the five aspects of God (called *Puruṣottama*)—*para* (highest), *vyūha* (emanation), *vibhava* (incarnation), *antaryāmin* (indweller) and *arcā* (form of worship)—it is called Pāñcarātra.

Pāñcarātra Literature

Pāñcarātra literature is very vast. The total number of works—generally called *saṁhitā*

or *tantra*—exceeds 200, according to lists given in various works, though only a few have been printed. Quite a few are in the form of manuscripts preserved in oriental libraries. Many others are not available in any form though their names are mentioned in other works. The following is a brief descriptive list of the works presently available.

1. *Ahribudhnya Saṁhitā*: This is a fairly voluminous work with 3880 verses in 60 chapters. The speciality of this work is that it deals with the four *vyūhas*, or emanations of the Lord, descriptions of several *mantras* (sacred syllables) and *yantras* (magical diagrams) as also rituals for curing diseases.

2. *Aniruddha Saṁhitā*: Also called *Aniruddhasaṁhitā-mahopaniṣad*, it has 34 chapters dealing entirely with descriptions of various rituals, methods of initiation, *prāyaścittas*, or expiations for sins, rules for making and installing the images of gods, and other similar topics.

3. *Hayaśirsa Saṁhitā*: A fairly exhaustive work in 144 chapters and distributed among 4 *kāṇḍas*, or sections—'Pratiṣṭhākāṇḍa', 'Saṅkarṣaṇākāṇḍa', 'Liṅgākāṇḍa' and 'Saurakāṇḍa'—it deals primarily with rituals concerning the installation of images of various minor deities as also the methods of their preparation.

4. *Īśvara Saṁhitā*: It is a work of 24 chapters of which 16 deal with ritualistic worship. Other subjects treated in this work are descriptions of images, methods of *dikṣā*, or spiritual initiation, practice of meditation, details regarding *mantras*, methods of self-control and the greatness of the Yādava Hill (now known as Melkote, a Vaiṣṇava pilgrim centre on a hillock near Mysore, Karnataka).

5. *Jayākhya Saṁhitā*: This work is one of

the three cardinal texts of Pāñcarātra literature. It has 33 *paṭalas*, or chapters, and deals with the following topics: a detailed account of creation; *yogābhyāsa* (practice of *yoga*) and *mantropāsanā* (spiritual practice through the repetition of *mantras*, or sacred formulas); various Vaiṣṇava *mantras*; *pūjā* (ritualistic worship) and *homa* (fire ritual); *dīksā* (initiation); temples and worship there; *ācāras* (codes of conduct) for Vaiṣṇavas; and *prāyaścittas*, or expiations of sins.

6. *Kāśyapa Saṁhitā*: This is a comparatively small work in 12 chapters. It deals mainly with poisons and methods of remedy by suitable *mantras*, or incantations.

7. *Mahā-sanatkumāra Saṁhitā*: This is a voluminous work of 10,000 verses spread over 40 sections in 4 chapters. It deals entirely with rituals of worship.

8. *Pādma Saṁhitā*: Dealing mainly with rituals and chanting of *mantras*, this work is in 31 chapters.

9. *Parama Saṁhitā*: A work in 31 chapters, it deals with the process of creation; rituals of initiation and worship; and *yoga* classified as *jñāna yoga* and *karma yoga*. It declares that *jñāna yoga*, which includes *prāṇāyāma* and *samādhi*, is superior to *karma yoga*, which seems to mean ritualistic worship of Viṣṇu.

10. *Parameśvara Saṁhitā*: A short work of 15 chapters, it deals with meditation on *mantras*, sacrifices and methods of rituals as also *prāyaścittas*, or expiations.

11. *Parāśara Saṁhitā*: A concise work in 8 chapters, it deals with the methods of *japa*, or the muttering of the name of God.

12. *Pauṣkara Saṁhitā*: Considered one of the earliest works of the Pāñcarātra system, this consists of 43 chapters. Apart from dealing with various kinds of image worship, it also contains certain philosophical views. It is interesting to note that some funeral sacrifices also find a place here.

13. *Sudarśana Saṁhitā*: A treatise comprising 41 chapters, it deals mainly with meditation on *mantras* and expiations of sins.

14. *Vihagendra Saṁhitā*: It is in 24 chapters. Apart from meditation on *mantras*, it deals with sacrificial oblations. In the twelfth chapter, the topic of *prāṇāyāma* as a part of the process of worship is also described extensively.

15. *Viṣṇu Saṁhitā*: A work in 30 chapters, it also deals mainly with ritualistic worship. Its philosophy is akin to that of Sāṅkhya with some variations like the *puruṣa* (the individual soul) being all-pervading and his activating *prakṛti* to evolve into the world.

16. *Viṣṇu-tattva Saṁhitā*: Comprising 39 chapters, it deals with image worship, ablutions and the wearing of Vaiṣṇava marks, and some purificatory rites.

Philosophy of the Pāñcarātra Āgamas

The philosophy of this system has been expounded in detail in the *Jayākhyā Saṁhitā*. A brief summary follows.

Though *yajña* (Vedic sacrifices), *dāna* (making gifts), *svādhyāya* (study of the Vedas) and other similar religious disciplines are useful in spiritual life, it is only *jñāna* (knowledge) of the *paratattva*, or the highest Reality, that can give *mokṣa*.

This *paratattva* (God) is the same as the Brahman of the Vedas and the Upaniṣads. He is of the nature of pure Consciousness (*cit*) and Bliss (*ānanda*). He is *anādi* and *ananta* (without beginning or end). He is the substratum and support of the whole universe. Though He is beyond all *guṇas*, He is also the *bhoktṛ* (experiencer, enjoyer) of all that is born out of the *guṇas*. He is *sarvajña* (omniscient) and *sarvásākta* (omnipotent). He is both transcendent and immanent with regard to this created universe. Hence He is too subtle to be perceived by the senses or the mind. However, He can be realized through the pure mind. This is called *mānasika-pratyakṣa*.

When they realize this Brahman or God, the *jīvas* appear to have become one with Him, but do maintain a subtle distinction also. Hence this philosophy can be called *Bhedā-*

beda or Dvaitādvaita.

As regards *sṛṣṭi*, or creation, three kinds are recognized: *brahmasarga*, *prakrtisarga* and *śuddhasarga*.

Brahmasarga is the projection of the four-faced Brahmā from Viṣṇu and the creation of the world by Brahmā.

Prakrtisarga is similar to the creation described in the Sāṅkhya philosophy. *Prakṛti* or *pradhāna* comprises the three well-known *guṇas*—*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The first product of the evolution of *pradhāna*, when *sattva* is predominant, is *buddhi* (cosmic intellect). The second product, when *rajas* has gained the upper hand, is *ahaṅkāra* (egoism). This is of three types: *prakāśātmā* or *taijasātmā*, *vikṛtātmā* and *bhūtātmā*. The first gives rise to the five *jñānen-driyas* (organs of knowledge) and the mind. The second produces the five *karmendriyas* (organs of action). From the last evolve the *sūkṣmabhūtas* or *tanmātras* (the five subtle elements). These then create the five gross elements. The whole creation comes out of a combination of these basic products. The *puruṣas* or *jīvas* (souls) get associated with bodies in accordance with their *karma*, due to the will of God. Their association with the inert bodies make the latter appear as conscious even as an iron piece acts like a magnet in the vicinity of a powerful magnet.

Śuddhasarga is the third creation. Here God, called Puruṣottama Vāsudeva, evolves from out of Himself three subsidiary agents or forms: Acyuta, Satya and Puruṣa. These forms in reality are non-different from Him. The third form, Puruṣa, acts as the *antaryāmin*, or the Inner Controller. It is He who inspires all the gods to work. It is He who binds the *jīvas* with *vāsanās* (residual impressions) and again, it is He who inspires them to undergo *sādhanās* (spiritual disciplines) to get out of the bondage of *vāsanās*.

The *māyā* (delusion) power of God makes the *jīvas* (through *vāsanās*, or past impressions) get identified with the body-mind complex. This association of *vāsanās* is *anādi*, or

beginningless. However, by the grace of God, the *antaryāmin*, or the Indwelling Power and Spirit, the *jīva* awakens to true knowledge and gets liberated from all shackles.

The path to this *mokṣa*, or liberation, starts with the inspiration of the *jīva* by God to seek a great *guru*, or spiritual preceptor. This *guru* gives the disciple *mantradīksā* (initiation with a holy name or syllable). Regular and steady practice of the *mantrajapa* (repetition of the divine name) results in *saṁādhi*, or total absorption in God.

Upāsanā, or meditation on God, has two stages. The first is called *kriyākhyā*. It is in the form of practice of various virtues like *śauca* (cleanliness), *yajña* (sacrifices), *tapas* (austerity), *adhyayana* (study of the scriptures), *ahimsā* (not harming others), *satya* (truth), *karuṇā* (compassion), *dāna* (giving gifts), and so on. The second is called *sattākhyā* or *jñānākhyā*. It is practically the same as *jñāna yoga*. Purified by the practice of *kriyākhyā*, the mind is now able to meditate on the Atman within, which results in the experience of unitive consciousness that *jñātṛ* (knower), *jñeya* (object of knowledge) and *jñāna* (knowledge) are all one and the same.

The Pāñcarātra Āgamas, especially the *Jayākhyā Saṁhitā*, describe two types of *yogas*: *mantradhyāna* and *yogābhīṣā*. The former consists of meditation on God with form along with the repetition of appropriate *mantras*. The latter is almost the same as the Yoga of Patañjali (200 BC).

A special contribution of the Pāñcarātra Āgamas to the religio-philosophical literature of Hinduism is the concept of the *vyūhas*, which are four. (Hence the name *caturvyūhas*, *catur* meaning 'four'.) *Vyūha* means a projection or emanation.

In this system, Paramātman, Nārāyaṇa, Viṣṇu, Bhagavān and Vāsudeva are the various names by which God the Supreme is known. *Bhaga* means *śadguṇas*, or the group of six blessed qualities. They are *jñāna* (knowledge), *aiśvarya* (lordship), *śakti* (ability, po-

tency), *bala* (strength), *virya* (virility, unaffectedness) and *tejas* (splendour). Since God, more commonly known as Vāsudeva in this system, has all these *guṇas*, or attributes, in the fullest measure, he is called Bhagavān. By the will of Bhagavān Vāsudeva (the first or the original *vyūha*) the second *vyūha*, Saikarṣaṇa (or Balarāma), emerges. From Saikarṣaṇa emanates Pradyumna and from him Aniruddha.

Though the latter three *vyūhas* are also in essence equal to Vāsudeva, they manifest only two of the six *guṇas* prominently, the other four being in a latent condition. If in Saikarṣaṇa *jñāna* and *bala* are predominant, in Pradyumna *aiśvarya* and *virya* are more prominent. Aniruddha, on the other hand, exhibits *śakti* and *tejas* to a much greater degree.

Each of the *vyūhas* is created with two activities, a creative and a moral one.

Each of the *vyūhas*, again, gives rise to three more sub-*vyūhas*, making a total of twelve emanations. They are Keśava, Nārāyaṇa, Mādhava, Govinda, Viṣṇu, Madhusūdana, Trivikrama, Vāmana, Śridhara, Hṛṣikeśa, Padmanābha and Dāmodara. These twelve are considered the *māsādhipas* or *adhidēvatās* (tutelary deities) of the twelve lunar months. They are also offered *arghya* (ceremo-

nial water) in ritualistic worship. Iconographically, all of them are identical except for the arrangement of the four emblems of Viṣṇu—śaṅkha (conch), cakra (discus), gadā (mace) and padma (lotus)—in the four hands.

Conclusion

The *Pāñcarātra Āgamas* are a continuation of the Vedic tradition. They also expand and expound concepts about God and devotion. Apart from *sṛṣti* (creation), *sthiti* (sustenance) and *pralaya* (dissolution) of the world, God discharges two more functions: *nigraha* (controlling and punishing evil-doers) and *anugraha* (showering His blessings on those who lead a good life and are devoted to Him). If the doctrines of *bhakti*, or devotion, and *prapatti*, or self-surrender, find an important place in this system, no less is the attention paid to rituals, worship, images of deities, and temples as also several mantras, the repetition of which will confer many a blessing on the votaries. Thus the *Pāñcarātra Āgamas* have contributed considerably towards practical Hinduism. Even today, most of the Vaiṣṇava temples, especially in South India, follow their dictates, thus keeping its traditions alive. *

Awakening

The story goes that a fire broke out in a house in which a man was fast asleep. They tried to carry him out through the window. No way. They tried to carry him out through the door. No way. He was just too huge and heavy.

They were pretty desperate till someone suggested, ‘Wake him up; then he’ll get out by himself.’

Only children need to be taken care of.

Wake up!

Or grow up!

—Anthony de Mello, The Prayer of the Frog, 2.78-9

A Hundred-year Saga of Service to God

SWAMI SHUDDHAVRATANANDA

The history of the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Varanasi, shows how under Heaven's guidance men—not money—make things happen. It is also illustrative of the way in which other centres of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission were built up. Their present structures may be imposing; but each brick represents so much sacrifice on the part of the pioneers who felt, dreamt, struggled and died. From their ashes sprang up fresh dreams and ideals to capture other hearts similarly tuned, till four generations of poor, helpless workers have brought about an achievement any organization can be proud of.

The Inspiration

The story of the Varanasi Home of Service is the story of a few inspired souls who, one blessed morning, saw the face of God not exactly in the temple of Lord Vishwanath, but in the face of an old woman.

One summer evening, 12 June 1900, two young men of Varanasi, Charuchandra Das and Jaminiranjan Majumdar, were intently discussing one of Swami Vivekananda's poetical compositions, 'To a Friend', which had been published in the Bengali monthly *Udbodhan*. As they reached the last lines of the poem, they were overwhelmed with emotion. Those few lines shed new light on the idea of service, which was very much after their hearts:

From highest Brahman to the yonder worm,
And to the very minutest atom,
Everywhere is the same God, the All-Love;
Friend, offer mind, soul, body, at their feet.
These are His manifold forms before thee.
Rejecting them, where seekest thou for God?
Who loves all beings without distinction,
He indeed is worshipping best his God.

It struck them that whatever they had been doing until then had only been for themselves, not for God. Real devotion, the poem implied, means looking upon all living beings as God Himself and serving them as such; that was the best way to approach God.

Charuchandra had been a fortunate student who had welcomed Swami Vivekananda in Calcutta when he returned in 1897 after his triumphant success in the West. Soon after that event, spurred by the spirit of renunciation and service, Charuchandra had given up his job at an attorney's office in Calcutta, bundled his favourite books and a picture of Sri Ramakrishna, and accompanied his parents to Varanasi to serve them in their old age.

There he came in contact with Jamini Ranjan, a penniless youth living on charity as a Sanskrit student, who introduced him to Kedarnath Maulik, another young man inspired by the life and message of Sri Ramakrishna. In 1899 this group observed Sri Ramakrishna's birthday at Kedarnath's place under the guidance of Swami Nirananjananda, who exhorted them to sacrifice their lives for the good of the many and the welfare of all. Some time after this, Swami Kalyanananda, a disciple of Swamiji, arrived at Varanasi as Kedarnath's guest. It was he who introduced the inspired utterance '*Atmano moksharthatm jagad-dhitaya cha*, For the liberation of one's own self and for the good of the world' to this circle of young men at Varanasi, and inspired them to adopt service to humanity as the aim of their life.

The Humble Beginning

To return to the main story. The next morning, 13 June 1900, Jaminiranjan was going for a bath in the Ganga. As he passed

through a lane in Bengalitola near the alms-house of the Maharani of Puntia, he heard a piteous cry: 'I have not eaten anything in four days, my son. Give me something to eat!' An old woman was lying sick on the roadside, unattended and unclaimed. The pathetic scene struck Jaminiranjan with a strange passion. Moved by the woman's misery, then and there he initiated his mission of selfless service by attending to her immediate needs and begging four annas from a passer-by, with which he bought her some milk. He then enlisted the cooperation of his friends Charuchandra and Kedarnath and had the woman removed to the Bhelupura hospital. Together they collected some food and clothing and raised money — one rupee! — by begging from door to door. They also took it upon themselves to nurse the old woman back to health. Her name was Nrityakali Dasi. Nrityakali recovered within a couple of weeks and the young men arranged her shelter at the Chowkaghat Poor House.

By this time, these young men had formed themselves into a band with the object of serving suffering pilgrims among those who gather in thousands in that sacred city. They called themselves 'Poor Men's Relief Association'. Charuchandra, their leader, started a dispensary and began to serve poor patients in his own way.

Early Days

Kedarnath soon renounced the world, hired a small house at Khemeshwar Ghat at

three rupees a month and took there the portrait of Sri Ramakrishna that Charuchandra had earlier installed in his house. This was really the first Sri Ramakrishna temple in Varanasi. Kedarnath now regularly began to go to Charuchandra's dispensary to work there and serve the patients.

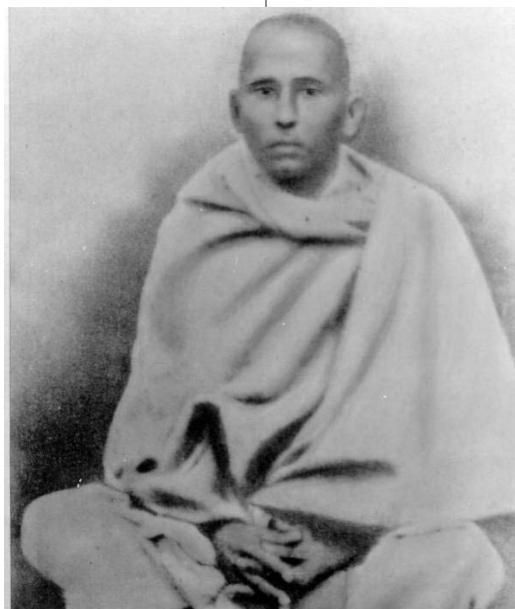
Beginning from 13 September 1900, the Association was located in a house rented for five rupees a month at D32/82 Jangambari, in the Ramapura quarter of Varanasi. Through it

they endeavoured with their limited means to provide food, shelter and medical aid to destitute pilgrims, helpless widows, and aged persons lying ill on the streets and ghats of the city.

The group's immediate task was to survey the different localities and pick up the destitute and extend them necessary relief, providing them with food, clothing and shelter, medical aid and nursing, or even arranging for their hospitalization

when necessary. To meet the necessities, members went from door to door begging for provisions, clothing and money.

Very soon, their silent service attracted the notice of the leading citizens of Varanasi like Babu Pramadas Mitra, Munshi Madho Lal, Mokshadadas Mitra and others, who convened a public meeting at the Bengalitola High School on 15 September 1900 to register their support of the Association and appeal for public involvement in its noble work. At that time, along with Charuchandra, Jaminiranjan and Kedarnath, who had devoted themselves



Swami Shubhananda

entirely to the Association's work, Harinath Odhadar, Haridas Chatterjee, Jnanendranath, Nigamachari Bibhutibhushan and Jagaddurlabh Ghose were the other active members of the Association.

The members did all the work by themselves; they could not afford to employ even a sweeper. A sweeper was engaged much later, when Dr Arthur Richardson, Principal of the Central Hindu College, promised to pay for his services. The sympathetic Dr Richardson commented in the Association's visitors' book on 12 January 1901: 'I can only say that it is a privilege to be able to help the members in their work. Every Hindu should feel proud of being associated with them, and the highest worship we can offer to God is to help and save the suffering who have been thrown across our path. May the work be blessed!'

The following illustration brings out the seriousness and commitment with which these pioneers set about their work. In early November 1900, one Panchanan Hazra, a 35-year-old Bengali brahmin, came to the holy city. He was a leper. Those were days when the disease was thought incurable. Neglected by his own family and shunned wherever he went, the poor man finally found shelter under a tree at Narad Ghat. Since leprosy is infectious, none dared approach him and he faced severe starvation. The onset of winter made his plight even worse. On one of their daily surveys of the city, some members of the Association

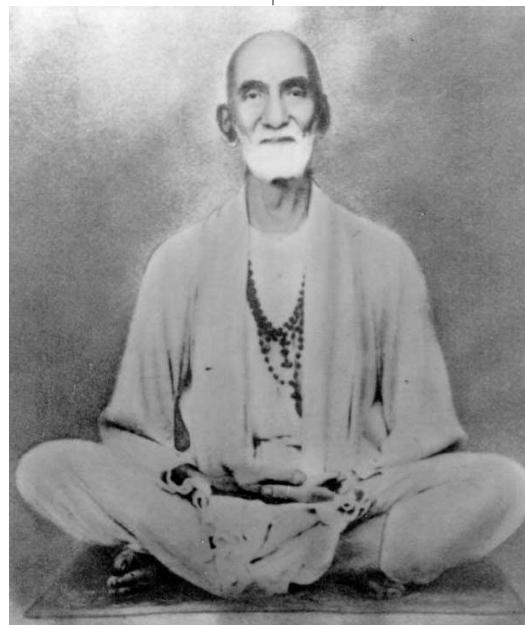
found him in this deplorable condition and immediately took care of him by getting him nourishing food and clothes. They brought a kind-hearted doctor and had him treated on the spot. Then a separate room was rented for him at Khemeshwar Ghat. After more than a month's treatment and nursing, Hazra was in a position to beg for himself from nearby almshouses before he was discharged. The incident may not look spectacular now, but a hundred years ago anybody who had anything to do with lepers was thought plain mad and risked becoming a social anathema himself.

The small space at the Association's disposal could not cope with the increasing demand of poor patients and was found too small for effective work. This necessitated shifting the Association in quick succession to 227 Dashashwamedh Road on 20 February and to D38/153 Ramapura on 2 June 1901. The second house was big but old, and therefore could be hired at a

monthly rent of ten rupees. During the first year (July 1900-June 1901), the Association provided relief to 261 destitutes, including 38 in its own house. Seven doctors helped the eight volunteers with free service.

Swami Vivekananda's Visit

It was at Ramapura that Swami Vivekananda visited the Poor Men's Relief Association, when he came to Varanasi in February 1902. Inspired so far only by his ideas, the group now gathered round their ideal in per-



Swami Achalananda

son. To them Swamiji said: 'Devoted service to God in the form of helpless men is the final goal of human life, equally for the pure-hearted brahmacharin, for the man of action and for man in general. Who are you to render relief? Nothing beyond service is within your power. The pride of rendering help to others goes before a fall.'

However, Swamiji was delighted to see their zeal and spirit—which were reminiscent of the days of St Francis of Assisi—and was proud of them. He blessed them: 'You have the true spirit, my boys, and you will always have my love and blessings! Go on bravely; never mind your poverty. Money will come. A great thing will grow of it, surpassing your fondest hopes!'

These words left a profound impression on the youths. In line with Swamiji's new direction and in deference to his wishes, they renamed their Association 'The Ramakrishna Home of Service'. Swamiji himself wrote an appeal to accompany their first report. The appeal worked like magic, and awakened in the public a desire to render help in some form or other to this cause of self-sacrificing service. Distinguished people were drawn more and more to this new temple dedicated to the worship of living gods.

Soon the group's association with the Ramakrishna Mission grew and Swamiji himself began to inspire it with his direct guidance. While in Varanasi, Swamiji gave *mantra-diksha* to Charuchandra (later Swami Shubhananda), Harinath (later Swami Sadashivamanda) and Haridas. Being out of station, Kedarnath received sannyasa from Swamiji at Belur Math in May 1902. He became Swami Achalananda.

Affiliation with the Ramakrishna Mission

The Ramakrishna Home of Service had sincere and self-sacrificing workers, and was rapidly expanding its scope of work and gaining in popularity. But it required the guidance of some central body and a permanent home for its expanding activities. The management too felt the need and suggested to Swami Brahmananda that it should be amalgamated with the Ramakrishna Mission. A public meeting called with his concurrence at the Carmichael Library on 28 September 1903 to



Swami Vivekananda temple (Advaita Ashrama behind)

confirm this decision of the managing committee, acclaimed it with joy. The Home became an integral part of the Ramakrishna Mission on 23 November 1902 and was renamed 'Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service'. Swami Brahmananda paid special attention to the Home, about which Swami Vivekananda had said to him, 'Keep an eye on this institution.' With this affiliation, the Home's future now became assured, and it launched forth into a life of diverse and fruitful activity.

The Home Grows

Although the quantum of work increased manifold, the Home's activities still

went on with great difficulty from the same old house rented in June 1901. In 1906 its members began to plan for their own hospital. At Swami Brahmananda's instance, Upendranarayan Deb of Calcutta, a devotee of Swami Vivekananda, contributed Rs 4000, to which was added another Rs 2000—the savings of



A portion of old hospital building

his whole life—by Tarinicharan Pal, to form a nucleus for the Home's permanent premises. Then, as if to prove that the unexpected happens when a genuine cause stirs people's imagination, the owner of the property on which the Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Varanasi, was located, proposed to Swami Shivananda to sell the property for just Rs 6000 if he was interested; but to no one else would he give it for such a small amount. On the swami's advice, Charuchandra purchased the vacant land for the Home of Service. This was on 31 July 1906.

In August 1906, Swami Brahmananda and Sister Nivedita appealed to the public for help to meet the huge building cost. Sister Nivedita often visited the Home. She stayed there and sometimes accompanied the monks in begging from door to door. Following in the steps of her master, she too delivered several public lectures for the Home's improvement.

Her impressive writings gradually helped make its ideals and activities known far and wide.

Swami Brahmananda laid the foundation stone in April 1908. Construction work commenced on 8 October under Swami Vijnanananda's direction. Swamis Satchidananda and Achalananda toiled hard, and especially those devotees who were closely associated with Swami Achalananda made generous donations. Within two years were completed four large general wards, two smaller ones, three segregation wards, an outdoor dispensary, an office, a kitchen, a library, a work shed and a morgue. The Home moved out of the Ramapura house to its permanent abode when Swami Brahmananda inaugurated the new establishment on 16 May 1910. The 46-bed hospital was formally opened to the public on 6 July 1910 by Mr W Gaskell, Collector of Varanasi. Mr Gaskell took an active interest in the Home, for which he secured from the municipality an annual subscription of Rs 120. This was later increased, and the municipal tax cancelled, at his instance.

Service and Sacrifice, the Driving Spirit

During these early years, a pervasive spirit of service and sacrifice drove the Home so powerfully that it influenced everybody who came within its ambit—some for life. Swami Shivananda describes it in an article he wrote for the *Udbodhan*: Upendranath was a craftsman who hailed from Bengal. He had contracted a particularly virulent type of malarial fever when he was about thirty years old, and prolonged suffering had utterly ruined his health. Having come to Varanasi to pray to Lord Vishwanath for relief from his miserable condition, the man found his way to the Home of Service. Thanks to the affection-

ate care he received there, he was fully restored to health within a short time. Deeply touched by the love he experienced at the Home, Upendra decided to stay back, preferring to serve the destitute as a whole-time *sevak*. He worked with the same spirit as the others. Once he nursed a fellow worker who had caught small pox while attending to a patient. The worker recovered due to Upendra's nursing, but Upendra himself fell prey to the deadly disease and could not be saved. He knew the risks, but that did not deflect him from the path he chose to tread—to serve the sick as God Himself. Having led a life worth living, Upendra offered his soul at the altar of service.

It was to this brave spirit he witnessed at the Home that Mahamati Gopal Krishna Gokhale paid homage during his visit on 28 December 1905: 'I sincerely admire the work that is being done [here]. Work such as this is the most fitting tribute to the memory of one whose heart was ... with the poor and suffering.'

Old Age Homes: Beginning

Many poor old people go to Varanasi to spend their last days in the holy city, and unforeseen circumstances often drive many of them to destitution. To provide temporary food and shelter to such people until they could provide for themselves, and to give permanent shelter to invalids, old age homes were felt necessary. So in addition to its indoor and outdoor service to poor patients, the Home added a refuge for invalids in February 1912. (About this time, it also experimented for a while with educational activities by conducting homes for boys and girls, and spinning and weaving classes, which were closed down later as not compatible with the main line of its work, which was medical service.)

In fact, even in 1910, members of the Home had begun doling out food right on the streets. The refuge was set up at a rented house in the Jangambari locality two years later, with the money and property bequeathed by an old brahmin lady of Karnataka and an anonymous monthly contribution of Rs 100. About 20 invalid women were accommodated in the beginning and arrangements were made for their food, clothing and other necessities.

In early 1913, a short time after the estab-



Old age home for destitute women (before renovation)

lishment of this branch, an unexpected help came from the famous publisher and merchant Nibaranchandra Das, who towards the end of his life made over to the Home nearly all his property plus the rent from his own residence near Dashashwamedh Ghat. His gift was originally and specially intended as charity to helpless indigent women and yielded a decent income. The women's home was now shifted to the late benefactor's residence.

Holy Mother's Visit

8 November 1912 is a red-letter day in the history of the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, Varanasi. It was on that day that Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi graced it by her visit. Swamis Brahmananda, Shivananda, Turiya-

nanda and Master Mahashay were also present. Holy Mother was taken round the wards in a palanquin. She also saw the flower and kitchen gardens and the living quarters of the monastics. Greatly pleased with the visit, she remarked: 'The Master is ever present in the place and Mother Lakshmi always casts her benign glance upon it.' She was told how the work had started and how quickly it had expanded in the course of a few years, drawing the admiration of the whole country. Mother was delighted. 'The place,' she remarked, 'is so charming that I feel like living here permanently.' She also visited the women's old age home and blessed the residents. After returning to her residence Holy Mother sent a ten-rupee note as her donation to the Home, which was accepted as her blessing. The Home has carefully preserved it to this day as a sacred treasure.

Expansion of the Work

By 1913, the Home's activities had vastly increased and demanded the expansion of the hospital. At the same time it faced an acute shortage of workers and scarcity of funds. Charuchandra now trained up a band of local workers. In order to help the few monastic *sevaks*, who had to do everything by themselves, some youths, mostly students, began to render part-time service at the Home. Even this could not cope with the load of work, since the number of people seeking help and the consequent pressure were constantly growing. However, all difficulties vanished through the untiring zeal of the workers and sympathetic contributions from the public. Swami Brahmananda, who always devoted his valuable time to the advancement of the Home, again appealed for public participation in its service activities.

Between 1914 and 1915 the Home acquired a large piece of adjoining land, on which it intended to build some more segregation wards and living quarters for monks and resident doctors. Swami Vijnanananda drew

the plan and prepared the estimates. In the beginning of 1915, Swamis Shivananda and Premananda performed the ground-breaking ceremony and the construction work began. In about a year five new segregation wards with 35 beds came up and were dedicated on 7 November 1916 by the swamis; they were opened to the public by Mr G B Lambert, Magistrate and Collector, Varanasi, on 10 November 1916.

In 1916 the Home also conducted a flood relief operation in Varanasi and Ballia districts.

The Trailblazers

The monastic *sevaks*, who had renounced all worldly ambitions and devoted themselves to the service of God in man, had the rare opportunity of living under the guidance of revered Swamis Brahmananda, Turiyananda and Saradananda. These great souls taught more by example than by precept.

It so happened that one winter night in 1914, a patient who had gone out to relieve himself accidentally fell into the water reservoir. Swami Brahmananda—the 51-year-old President of the Ramakrishna Order—heard his frantic shouts and rushed out in the dead of night and rescued the patient with the help of another monk. Maharaj's agonizing silence all next day taught an unforgettable lesson to the *sevaks* who were supposed to be on duty the previous night.

Swami Turiyananda, who spent the last few years of his life in the Home, was another stalwart. One of his personal attendants was once requested to work in the hospital. But the monk expressed a preference to continue serving Turiyanandaji: he thought that was surely superior. Turiyanandaji was visibly displeased with him and said: 'Remember, what you are asked to do is not mere hospital work—just taking care of a few patients. It is worship of God Himself. If you can serve the patients in the right spirit, in a single day you can attain to the highest spiritual realization!'

Swami Vishwarupananda was a young monk whose post was at the hospital dressing room. In spite of himself, he found it quite difficult to put up with the putrid smell of wounds. Swami Saradananda came to know of the monk's discomfort and advised him to pray fervently to Sri Ramakrishna for greater endurance. Following this advice the monk indeed could overcome his weakness.

Charuchandra's own life was a model. He was the leader of the Home and solely responsible for its entire management. He was very strict when it came to principles, but at the same time it was against his nature to arbitrarily impose his will on his followers. He was extraordinarily kind and humble in his dealings with people and behaved as if he was everybody's servant. Not to speak of the patients, who were his idols—addressing them as *narayanas* and the monks as *sevaks* was, and still is, a cherished custom—he would look to the needs and comforts of the *sevaks* with motherly solicitude. Everybody in the Home greatly loved and respected him.

Charuchandra always kept in mind what his master, Swamiji, had once told him: to regard even a small coin of donation as though it were his very lifeblood. He was extremely economical, and during his tenure it was almost impossible to waste a single pie. Here is an instance of Charuchandra's concern for the institution: One day a worker asked for two cloves to chew after meals as a mouth-freshener. But Home regulations allowed only one and Charuchandra declined to oblige. This was his explanation: he was a mere custodian—not owner of the Home—and so could not ignore the rules!

Speaking at a function during the Home's centenary celebrations last year, Sri-

mat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj reminisced: A certain monk was very particular about his early morning bath in the Ganga and his daily visits to the temples of Lord Vishwanath and Mother Annapurna. No doubt he attended to his work at the *narayan bhandar* (the hospital kitchen, where food is prepared for the patients) with the utmost sincerity. But he once complained that he was unable to keep up with his work with sustained enthusiasm. Swami Achalananda pointedly asked him: 'Have you ever visited and worshipped God in *this* temple?' The hint brought the monk back to his senses.

To Swami Achalananda (affectionately



Ambika Dham, where Turiyanandaji, Achalanandaji and Sadashivanandaji stayed

called Kedar Baba by his guru, Swami Vivekananda) patients were verily God Himself, and he would show displeasure if anybody referred to them as just patients. He would insist on their being called *narayans*. Kedar Baba devoted practically his whole life to the perpetuation of his master's ideal of service to humanity. He would grow eloquent as he spoke of Swamiji's new gospel of service. Himself a spiritual luminary, he emphasized unselfish work as much as he did contemplative life. Service in the true spirit, Kedar Baba believed, was no less than worship in the temple. Work

performed in a spirit of humble service is conducive to one's spiritual welfare, but the same work done with any other motive becomes a source of fresh bondage. Newcomers at the Home were greatly profited by Kedar Baba's direction, which helped them maintain a spiritual attitude while serving the poor.

The Home on the March

Between 1915 and 1930 the Home underwent a steady expansion. In 1917 a two-storeyed house was erected to accommodate as many as 12 workers. The following year the Home initiated influenza epidemic relief work in the city. In 1918 it also started an orphanage for about 10 boys, who were given moral and spiritual education besides monetary aid for tuition fees and textbooks. These boys were later admitted into the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar. This activity was discontinued in 1925, although the Home still extends financial support to deserving students. In 1919 the management began to take in paralytic patients. The number of such cases ranged between 10 and 20 and the work continued till 1946. A new house for the resident doctor came into being in 1921 and four more rooms were added to the female segregation ward in 1922. From 1923 till the 1940s the Home arranged food and shelter for strangers to the city. During this period the number of beneficiaries rose from 200 to 400 a year. In 1924 an officers' quarters and an anti-septic operation theatre were built. A surgical ward followed these in 1926. In 1928 the Home organized a cholera relief project in Varanasi. A short time later, with the addition of a new aseptic operation theatre and the purchase of some more land adjacent to its compound, the Home made further advancement. 28 physicians were then giving honorary service.

Work for Women

The women's home for girls and widows of respectable families started on a modest scale in 1910 had doubled its strength by 1918.

That year a small house in Luxa was purchased for Rs 3000, where the inmates were given moral and religious instruction with academic education in addition to vocational training in sewing and such other crafts. The object was to make them independent. They could also nurse female patients at the hospital. The home's management was placed in the hands of Sudhira Devi, who was in charge of Sister Nivedita's girls' school in Calcutta, recognizing her administrative ability. However, with her sudden death in a train accident in 1920, the home suffered a setback.

Till this time the hospital could only admit old female patients because of the dearth of *sevikas* (female workers). With the elimination of that constraint, the women's wing of the hospital was now separated from the men's wing. Between 1915 and 1922 a number of wards with a total of 50 beds were added to the women's wing. A women workers' quarters came up in 1922, and another was added in 1930, when the women's home moved into the hospital complex. More rooms were added and the capacity increased in 1938. In 1948 a female outdoor dispensary was opened and a female aseptic surgical ward came into being in 1957. The number of female patients steadily increased through the 1960s and 1980s. 1986 saw a new annexe and renovation and upgrade of the old block.

The men's old age home was started in 1923 with a capacity of 25, though the number of occupants did not increase beyond 10 till the 1950s. Renovation and expansion of this home took place in 1992.

Bereavements

From 1919 until his mahasamadhi three years later, Swami Turiyananda lived in the Home, and its workers enjoyed the spiritual atmosphere created by his presence. Turiyanandaji showed keen interest in the spiritual welfare of each individual monk. He encouraged them in their work and taught them how to serve with the true spirit. He also gave classes

on the Upanishads, the *Gita*, the *Yoga Vasishtha* and Swamiji's works. A few days before his passing on 21 July 1922, he inspired the monks with these words: 'Dispel all doubts; devote body, mind and soul wholly to His work; there is no room for doubt; go on with your work, which will lead you to the Goal. Swamiji once told me in Darjeeling: "Brother Hari, this time I have chalked out a new path; for so long people believed that salvation is possible only through contemplation, reasoning and telling the beads. Youths of the present age will get salvation in this life by doing His work. It is His injunction; banish all doubts." Turiyanandaji's demise was an irreparable loss to the Ramakrishna Order, especially to the monks at the Varanasi Home of Service.

By 1921, Charuchandra had devoted the best part of his life to the realization of the ideal of selfless service. Having worshipped *nara-narayana*, God in human form, with utter dedication for over two decades, he decided to retire from active work for good. Charuchandra left for Prayag on Swamiji's birthday in January 1921 to perform austerities in preparation for monastic life. That very year, on Sri Ramakrishna's birthday, Swami Brahmananda formally initiated him into sannyasa, and Charuchandra became Swami Shubhananda. Founder of this great institution, he was instrumental in bringing about much of its present usefulness. But such was his spirit of detachment that in spite of being entreated by Swami Kalikananda, his successor, to live at the Home, Swami Shubhananda chose to live the rest of his life as a wandering sadhu! The Home bore yet another great shock in April 1926 when it lost its beloved leader Swami

Shubhananda to an unfortunate accident in Kankhal.

However, God's plan is not drawn on sand. By the late 1920s, the trailblazers had set the pace and the Home was on a solid footing ideologically and materially. An unknown foreign visitor recorded his impressions in an



Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Ward

article he wrote for *Prabuddha Bharata*'s April 1927 issue: 'The simplicity and perfect orderliness of buildings covering extensive area of the Home, indicating Hindu charity in a variety of ways, cannot but appeal to anyone who visits it. ... A good number of patients were picked up from the roadside by the workers of the Home, who go daily round the city with this express object. I was particularly struck by the happiness in the faces of the unfortunate inmates, which showed that they get full attention and utmost care. I could not talk to them as they did not understand my language, but their looks seemed to thankfully acknowledge the benefits they received at the Home. ... There were in all about a hundred and twenty patients, and I found the workers, all monastic, attending to their comfort carefully and lovingly, though some of the patients were suffering from unclean diseases. ... A good majority of the workers, I learnt, are

English educated and some of them have the highest university qualifications, and all of them are cultured gentlemen, their only reward lying in their own inward satisfaction. Seeing them one is reminded of the verse: "I do not covet earthly kingdom or heaven or even salvation; I desire for the removal of the miseries of the afflicted."

Further Expansion and Consolidation

The scope of the Home's services was not limited to the city of Varanasi. In 1934 the Home rose to the challenge when a major earthquake hit Bihar, and within a decade, in 1943, it found itself in the vortex of the Bengal famine relief work.



Operation Theatre-cum-Surgical Block

The addition in 1935 of a pathological laboratory with the latest diagnostic facilities was an important step forward. In 1946 the operation theatre acquired a surgical operation table and an electrical sterilizer.

Then came Independence, following which the Home's activities underwent rapid expansion. Leading figures who visited the Home during this time, including the governor, central and state ministers, high court judges, the mayor, top executives and sociologists, were deeply moved when they saw the actual demonstration of real altruism. They were filled with hope to find a great ideal be-

ing realized there. To many others who came in contact with it, the way of life at the Home showed the road to peace and blessedness.

The following details give us an idea of the Home's growth profile during the post-Independence years. In order to provide a wholesome diet to the patients the Home began a small dairy in 1948. During 1950-51, with the modernization of the hospital's infrastructure, two X-ray machines were installed in a separate building and an electrotherapy department was started. From 1955 to 1963 the Home ran a milk canteen from its outdoor dispensary; milk was distributed daily to an average of 600 people, including children, patients, invalids and expectant mothers. In 1955 a new wing of outpatient department and an extension of monks' quarters were built. In 1960 a new 200 mA X-ray machine was commissioned. The 52-bed Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Ward came into existence in 1963. A separate eye ward with 25 beds was started in 1965. In 1971 a bigger operation theatre-cum-surgical block having 16 cabins and 2 general wards came up. The number of cows in the dairy was augmented in 1972. In 1975 an electrocardiograph was installed, and in 1977 a mobile X-ray unit was commissioned. 1978 saw a new monks' quarters and the renovation of the dairy. In 1987 a new resident doctors' quarters was built. One more ECG machine was added in 1988 and a powerful 700 mA X-ray machine was installed in 1989. The dairy, which underwent extensive improvement during this time, now has nearly 70 cows, yielding an average of 350 litres of milk daily. A large building was inaugurated in 1988 to accommodate monks of the Ramakrishna Order who had retired from active service.

During the 1990s the hospital was thoroughly modernized with the acquisition, among other things, of an auto-analyser and a computer for the pathological laboratory, a

gastrointestinal-fibrescope, an ultrasonographer and an echocardiographer. In 1992 the X-ray block was extended. The mobile medical unit started in 1997 is doing immense service to the poor in rural areas.

Statistics at a Glance

Culled from the Home's annual report for 2000-01, the following statistics give us a brief summary of its present status: the hospital had 230 beds and admitted 6185 patients; the outdoor dispensary (offering both allopathy and homeopathy services) with eye, ENT, dental, X-ray, electrotherapy and cardiology sections treated 1,90,592 cases; the laboratory made 63,690 diagnoses, and the X-ray, electrocardiography and ultrasonography departments handled 9685, 1531 and 2418 cases, respectively; the mobile dispensary benefited 6968 persons; and the two old age homes accommodated 30 men and 36 women. In addition to all this, the Home disbursed Rs 4,18,210 in regular financial aid and distributed clothes and medicines worth Rs 1,57,579 to indigent people.

Ban Bihari Maharaj

No account of the Varanasi Home of Service is complete without reference to Swami Muktanandaji Maharaj, better known as Ban Bihari Maharaj or Ban Baba. Ban Bihari Maharaj joined the Home sometime in the 1930s and was closely associated with Swami Achalananda, from whom he imbibed the spirit of worshipful service.

Ban Bihari Maharaj's day began with a bath in the Ganga and a visit at dawn to Lord Vishwanath and Mother Annapurna. Early in the morning he would arrive at the hospital and begin the work of dressing wounds. His love for the patients was so great that he would forget himself completely while serving them! Late in the afternoon he would go to his room and, after a short rest, return to work. In those days disposable bandages were not yet widely used. Maharaj would wash used

bandages and hang them out to dry in the sun. In the evening he would visit the Kedarnath temple and sit down by the Ganga for *japa*.

Nothing extraordinary—except that Ban Bihari Maharaj did it for sixty years with supreme devotion. His devotion gradually transformed his work into wholehearted worship. The humble dressing room took on the aura of a shrine and people could see that he was worshipping, not just working. As years passed it began to appear as though Providence had blessed Ban Bihari Maharaj with the healing touch. Patients came to have absolute faith in him and often demanded that he treat their wounds! Whenever and wherever they found him, they would implore Ban Bihari Maharaj to just touch them once; to them he was an angel. Even experienced surgeons would refer to Maharaj cases that did not respond to their treatment—a proof of their confidence in his unfailing power of healing.

There are many stories about Ban Bihari Maharaj and his golden touch. One day some swamis of the Home brought in a lunatic who had a big wound on his back with maggots all over. They locked him up in a room so that he could not escape and made arrangements for his meals. Nobody could get near him because of the revolting stench of the wound—except Ban Bihari Maharaj. Under his tender care the wound began to heal soon. Later on, the man's mental condition also received treatment at the Home and he returned home a normal person.

Ban Bihari Maharaj once even went to the extent of giving the impression that a certain patient was 'my own father, who has come to Varanasi to spend his last days here'. That was a plan he hit upon to ensure that the old man received the best care! Sure enough, the case got all the attention it deserved.

The late Srimat Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj was yet another person cured by Ban Bihari Maharaj. When he was head of Rama-krishna Ashrama, Rajkot, he once had a stub-



Srimat Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj (left) and the author in front of the Centenary Memorial Building

born wound on his hand that refused to yield to any treatment. On somebody's suggestion, Bhuteshanandaji came to Varanasi to let Ban Bihari Maharaj have a look at it. To Bhuteshanandaji's great surprise, the wound began to show signs of healing up just after a few days of treatment by Ban Bihari Maharaj.

A Century of Exemplary Dedication

If today the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service has grown into a large hospital known across North India, it is because of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi's grace, Swami Vivekananda's blessings and the self-sacrifice of its pioneers.

The Home celebrated its hundredth anniversary in November 2000. It was no ordinary celebration. The usual ceremonies apart, its monks *literally* worshipped—with flowers and fruits and incense and light to the accom-

paniment of Vedic chanting!—each and every patient in its wards. They showered gifts on the destitute right on the pavements, as they always do on all important occasions. That is some tradition! On 14 February 2002, Srimat Swami Ranganathanandaji Maharaj, President of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, opened the spacious new Centenary Memorial Outpatient Department as part of the concluding functions.

What sustains this huge temple of service is the spontaneous help coming in different ways, and donations from generous people. But the real power behind the institution is the inspired dedication of a handful of monks, doctors, nurses, *sevaks* and *sevikas*, who never fail to give their best in order to preserve the Home's glorious culture. The immortal words of the great Swami Vivekananda still echo in their hearts: 'May I be born again and again, and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the sum total of all souls—and above all ... my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races ... is the special object of my worship.'

*

Acknowledgements

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2. Swami Narottamananda, *Seva* (Varanasi: Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, 1930).
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Jābāla Upaniṣad

TRANSLATED BY SWAMI ATMAPRIYANANDA

Section Five

A *brāhmaṇa*'s right to renunciation (*sannyāsa*)

ब्रह्मणस्य सन्यासेऽधिकारः:

अथ हैनमत्रिः पप्रच्छ याज्ञवल्क्यम् । पृच्छामि त्वा याज्ञवल्क्यायज्ञोपवीती कथं ब्रह्मण इति । स होवाच याज्ञवल्क्यः । इदमेवास्य यज्ञोपवीतं य आत्मा अपः प्राश्याचम्य । अयं विधिः प्रव्राजिनाम् ॥१॥

1. Then the [sage] Atri asked Yājñavalkya: 'May I ask you, Yājñavalkya, how is one without the sacred thread¹ [considered] a *brāhmaṇa*? Yājñavalkya replied: [The conviction that he is the] Self (Ātman) is his sacred thread.² He shall then sip water [ceremonially three times, technically called *ācamana*]. This is the procedure enjoined on those who renounce worldly life.³

Determining the duties of those not entitled to *sannyāsa*⁴

सन्यासेऽनधिकृतानां कर्तव्यनिरूपणम्

वीराध्वाने वानाशके वापां प्रवेशे वाग्निप्रवेशे वा महाप्रस्थाने वा । अथ परिव्राद्विवर्णवासा मुण्डोऽपरिग्रहः शुचिरद्रोही भैक्षमाणो ब्रह्माभूयाय भवति । यद्यातुरः स्यान्मनसा वाचा सन्यसेत् । एष पन्था ब्रह्मणा हानुवित्तस्तेनैति सन्यासी ब्रह्मविदिति । एवमेवैष भगवन्निति वै याज्ञवल्क्य ॥२॥

2. [Those not entitled to formal *sannyāsa*, may, however, seek liberation, or *mokṣa*] in the path of the brave [that is, those who court death in the battlefield];⁵ or fast [unto death as a spiritual discipline]; or enter into the waters [of a holy river, to rise no more]; or enter into [a blazing] fire; or undertake the great journey [to a remote and inaccessible sacred place, from which they may not return].

[In case a person is entitled to study, contemplation and the like,] then the wandering monk, wearing [ochre-] coloured garment, with head shaven, accepting nothing [except perhaps the barest minimum required for bodily sustenance], being pure [both inwardly and outwardly], injuring none [in thought, word and deed], living on alms [just for the sake of sustaining his life], becomes fit to realize Brahman. If a person is sorely afflicted [and therefore incapable of performing any formal rites of *sannyāsa*], he may renounce worldly life by a mental resolve or by uttering [*mantras*] through speech.⁶ This path [of renunciation] has been found by Brahmā. By [following] this path as told by Brahmā, a *sannyāsin* (one who has renounced the worldly life) realizes Brahman. [Atri approvingly and appreciatively responded to what was thus told to him by the sage Yājñavalkya]: 'Thus indeed it is, surely, Yājñavalkya!'

(to be continued)

Notes

1. A sacred thread (*yajñopavita*) with which a *brāhmaṇa* boy is invested at a very tender age is what signifies his *brāhmaṇa*-hood.

2. This knowledge of Brahman is verily the sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*) of *sannyāsins*, for it leads them to the Supreme Being (Viṣṇu), who is of the form of *yajña*. (There is a śruti statement: 'Yajña is indeed Viṣṇu.') He thus becomes convinced that he is the self-effulgent Ātman. —Upaniṣad Brahmayogin's commentary.
3. The *sannyāsa* procedure mentioned here is elaborated as follows in Upaniṣad Brahmayogin's commentary: After repeating the *priṣṭa mantra*, he shall discard his tuft of hair and the sacred thread in the waters uttering the *mantra* 'May you go to the ocean. *Svāhā*.' Then he shall perform the *ācamana* (ceremonial sipping of water).
4. Traditionally, *ksatriyas* and *vaiśyas* among the 'twice-born' are not supposed to be entitled to *sannyāsa*. One possible reason for this inhibition, considering the structure of caste-based society in the olden times, could be that the *ksatriya*, a warrior, and the *vaiśya*, a businessman, are respectively charged with the responsibility of protecting society, and of generating and circulating wealth. If they are taken away from the mainstream of society through *sannyāsa*, then the social structure would collapse. Some others who are debarred from *sannyāsa* are those afflicted with incurable diseases, those who for some reason are utterly incapable of study, contemplation and the like.
5. For a *ksatriya*, bravely facing death on the battlefield doing his duty for the society and the country, leads to liberation.
6. Those who are faced with some terrible danger like being overpowered by a tiger or a dacoit, or afflicted with some incurable disease—the śruti provides for such people also to take to *sannyāsa* just before death.

Manifest Your Self in a High Degree

The remedy for weakness is not brooding over weakness, but thinking of strength. Teach men of the strength that is already within them. Instead of telling them they are sinners, the Vedanta takes the opposite position, and says, 'You are pure and perfect, and what you call sin does not belong to you.' Sins are very low degrees of Self-manifestation; manifest your Self in a high degree. That is the one thing to remember; all of us can do that. Never say, 'No', never say, 'I cannot', for you are infinite. Even time and space are as nothing compared with your nature. You can do anything and everything, you are almighty.

—Swami Vivekananda, CW, 2.300

Take off that veil of hypnotism which you have cast upon the world, send not out thoughts and words of weakness unto humanity. Know that all sins and all evils can be summed up in that one word, weakness. It is weakness that is the motive power in all evil doing; it is weakness that is the source of all selfishness; it is weakness that makes men injure others; it is weakness that makes them manifest what they are not in reality. Let them all know what they are; let them repeat day and night what they are. Soham. Let them suck it in with their mothers' milk, this idea of strength—I am He, I am He.

—CW, 3.426